

The Development of Israel Study Programs By Alvin Schiff

Full-time study in a *yeshiva* or seminary in Israel for one or two years after graduation from a *yeshiva* or Jewish day high school is now a commonplace phenomenon in North American, English, French, South African, and Australian modern Orthodox Jewish education. The overall impact of the post-high school *yeshiva* and seminary study programs is substantial, particularly regarding religious ritual experience, commitment to continued Torah study, and to Zionism, including the desire to make aliyah. The Israeli Zionist *yeshivot* for men and seminaries for women inculcate a strong feeling of responsibility for *K'lal Yisrael*, a love for the State of Israel, and initiate a continuing relationship with the Jewish State and the *yishuv*.

In 1957, as pedagogic consultant and supervisor of the Department of Jewish Day Schools and *Yeshivot* of the Jewish Education Committee of New York (now the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York), I developed two types of programs for study in Israel. The first type — *Tochnit Yod Bet* (The Twelfth Year Program)—was for seniors in public high schools who studied in Conservative and Reform supplementary schools and for seniors in *yeshiva* and Jewish day high schools. The second type of program — *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* (The Thirteenth Year Program) — was for graduates of public high schools who also studied in Reform and Conservative congregational schools and for graduates of *Yeshiva* and Jewish Day High Schools.

The program for seniors — *Tochnit Yod Bet* — was based upon the reality that seniors in New York high schools spend the spring term of their senior year largely on non-academic projects since, essentially, they have completed the high school curriculum and have taken all the necessary exams for graduation.

Tochnit Yod Bet involved study in Israel for seven months, from mid-January through August. Arrangements to take New York State Regents exams and school final tests in May, if necessary, were made with individual schools, with the New York City Board of Education, with several local district boards in Westchester and Long Island, and with the New York State Education Department. Arrangements were also made for students to take general studies courses, if needed. The basic program in Israel included a Hebrew ulpan, intensive Jewish studies, and educational touring.

Tochnit Yod Bet failed to materialize for public high school seniors who studied in congregational schools, because neither the students nor their parents showed much interest in this program. Moreover, the lay, rabbinic, and educational leaders of the synagogues did not promote it adequately. After two years of serious attempts to initiate *Tochnit Yod Bet*, including the provision of the possibility to transfer college credit to universities in the United States and financial support from the Scheuer Foundation, this program did not take hold for public high school seniors, because of the total lack of enrollment.

On the other hand, *Tochnit Yod Bet* was acceptable to *yeshiva* high school seniors and their parents and to day school teachers. However, it never materialized for *yeshiva* high school students, because the boards of directors of the Jewish day and *yeshiva* High Schools did not want to lose a semester of tuition. Therefore, they refused to approve *Tochnit Yod Bet*. Nevertheless, several individual Jewish day school seniors made arrangements through the Torah Education Department of the World Zionist Organization to study in Israel during the 1958 spring term. But, *Tochnit Yod Bet* did not continue to attract students beyond 1958.

Tochnit Yod Gimmel involved a post-high school year of study, either in a university or post-secondary yeshiva or seminary in Israel. It failed to attract a sufficient number of enrollees from the Jewish supplementary school community because of parental, student, and synagogue leadership apathy. Efforts to send public high school graduates for a years' study in Israel were discontinued in 1959.

However, the post-high school year of study idea caught on in the modern Orthodox yeshiva and Jewish day school world. It started slowly in 1958 in Greater New York with 25 graduates. Promotion and recruitment for the program were aided by the World Zionist Organization Torah Education Department in the United States. In addition, I enlisted the help of Rabbi Simhah Teitelbaum, a yeshiva high school principal who was committed to the idea of study in Israel for yeshiva and Jewish day high school graduates and felt strongly about its potential impact upon them. Together, we promoted the program in New York yeshivot and Jewish day high schools. The American office of the Torah Education Department provided technical support.

Early Growth

Primarily, the first years of the post-high school year of study took place in the Yeshiva Kerem B'Yavneh and at Machon Gold, which initially enrolled men and women.

The program was encouraged and supported wholeheartedly by the *Yeshiva* High School Principals' Council of the Department of Jewish Day Schools and yeshivot of the Jewish Education Committee of New York. It grew rapidly and by the mid-1970s, it is estimated that over 500 Greater New York yeshiva high school graduates were going annually to Israel for an intensive Zionist post-high school learning experience. In the mid-1960s the program began to attract the attention of yeshiva high school principals throughout the United States and Canada. This further increased Diaspora enrollment in Israel Orthodox educational institutions.

The *Minhal Studentim*, the Student Authority of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption (founded by the Merkaz Hatefutzot — Israel Foundation for Cultural relations with World Jewry), in conjunction with the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish Agency, and the Torah Education Department helped significantly in the development of *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* during its early years.

Continued Growth

Since that time, post-high school study in Zionist schools in Israel has continued to grow steadily. It is estimated that by 1990 approximately 1600 high school graduates were spending a year of study in Orthodox Zionist yeshivot and seminaries in Israel. In 2001-2002, approximately 1400 Diaspora high school graduates were enrolled in 17 Israeli Orthodox Zionist yeshivot for men and about 700 graduates in 16 Orthodox Zionist seminaries for women for one or more years of intensive Judaic study. In addition, there were several hundred boys and girls in quasi-Zionist Israeli schools.

One of the motivating factors in the increased student participation in Israeli Zionist schools is the arrangement with North American universities to grant credit towards the baccalaureate degree for post-high school yeshiva and seminary study in Israel. This type of arrangement was initiated in the Greater New York area with Yeshiva College, Stern College for Women, Touro College, Brooklyn College, Queens College, and the Ramapo Community College. Some colleges award as much as a full year's credit for undergraduate study. Students desiring American college credit are required to submit transcripts of study from the Israeli yeshivot

and seminaries where they studied. As many as 1000 students per year currently transfer credit from Israeli institutions to American universities.

At my request, Rabbi Ellis Block, director of the Department of *Yeshivot* and Jewish Day Schools of the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, conducted a survey of the Modern Orthodox yeshiva and Jewish day high schools in the greater New York area during Spring 2002 to ascertain the level of participation of the June 2001 graduates in the 2001-2002 *Tochnit Yod Gimmel*. Twenty-two schools responded to his inquiry. The findings indicate that the enrollment of the male graduates of individual high schools in post-high school yeshiva study in Israel ranged from 28% to 97% of the graduating classes and averaged 65%. The participation of female graduates of individual schools in *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* ranged from 20% to 91% and averaged 45% of the total number of graduates. Eighty-two percent of the ten leading Zionist Jewish day and yeshiva high schools enrolled in post-high school study in Israel in 2001-2002.

All told, based upon the information received from responding schools, 900 graduates of Modern Orthodox high schools in Metropolitan New York were enrolled in 2001-2002 post-high school programs of study in Israel.

Tochnit Yod Gimmel is enthusiastically supported and encouraged by yeshiva teachers and administrators. The year in Israel programs are viewed as an essential part of the yeshiva experience for university-bound adolescents. Recognizing the central place that post-high school Israel study has for graduates, many yeshiva high schools now sponsor Israel guidance departments that rival their college guidance departments in stature, offering assistance to seniors in choosing the right program, the application process, arranging for financial aid, and the transfer of credits to American universities. Schools, parents, and students in modern yeshiva high schools in North America expect that, as a matter of course, the majority of graduates will spend the year after graduation in a yeshiva program in Israel.

As *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* developed and students enjoyed their year of study in Israel, many decided to spend a second year — *Shannah Bet* — in Israeli yeshivot and seminaries. The desire to continue for a second year often created tension between students and their parents who wanted them to return home and begin their university study. It seems that parents are now more receptive to the idea of a second year of study in Israel. Currently, according to the heads of several leading Israeli Zionist institutions, as many as 75 percent of their students remain for *Shannah Bet*.

The annual cost of the study programs in Israel varies between \$10,000 and \$13,000, significantly less than the cost of university study in North America. The annual fee includes room and board, but not always does it include medical insurance and books. Academic scholarships and financial aid are available at most of the Israeli Zionist yeshivot for men and seminaries for women. It is estimated that tuition fees cover about 80 percent of the budgets for Diaspora students studying in the Israeli yeshivot and seminaries.

The increase in the number of North American participants in the 1960s and 1970s prompted the establishment of many new post-high school programs in Israel, ranging from modern Orthodox, Zionist hesder yeshivot (where the Israeli students alternate Judaic studies with their service in the Israeli army) and women's seminaries to traditional European-style yeshivot, Hassidic yeshivot and Beth Jacob schools. Many of these institutions were founded by American olim (immigrants to Israel). Most of the newly-organized women's seminaries are solely for Diaspora high school graduates and do not enroll Israeli students. According to Dr

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seminaries are solely for Diaspora high school graduates and do not enroll Israeli students. According to Dr. Moshe Sosevsky, dean of Yeshivat Or Yerushalayim and one of the pioneer American educators in overseas Zionist study programs for post-high school Orthodox boys, “Today for the modern Orthodox, study in Israel has become almost an extension of yeshiva high school. Whereas, once only the most serious post-high school students came to Israel to study, now more than 70% of American yeshiva high school graduates come for one year.”

The institutions established by American Orthodox educators provide a more structured schedule than the Israeli yeshivot and seminaries. They also maintain more formal guidance programs for participants. They are highly sensitive to the needs of American high school graduates who are away from home for an extended period for the first time.

The Orthodox Zionist programs available to North American high school graduates differ widely. The differences are primarily the institutional commitment to Zionism and to the State of Israel, the acceptance of the validity and importance of secular education, attitudes towards to non-religious Jewish community and the study of subjects other than Torah She-Be'al Peh (Oral Law -- Talmud) and halakhah (Jewish law), particularly Jewish history (including Zionism), Tanakh (the Torah, Prophets and Writings), Jewish Thought, modern Israel and conversational Hebrew, and the sponsorship of educational tours of Israel.

Orthodox Zionism requires that the educational institutions support the State of Israel and promote service in the Israeli Defense Forces for Israeli students, as well as the religious ideals of Eretz Yisrael and Shivat Zion (The Return to Zion). This means displaying the Israeli flag in the school building and incorporating the prayer for the State of Israel in Sabbath and holiday services when the Torah is read. And finally, Orthodox Zionism means doing acts of hesed, as volunteers in areas of communal and educational need.

The Zionist and quasi-Zionist institutions observe *Yom Hazikaron* (Israeli Remembrance Day) and *Yom Ha'atzma-ut* (Israeli Independence Day) in a variety of ways. For example, in Michlallah, on Remembrance Day in 2002, one of the Judaic Studies teachers spoke to the student body on the meaning of Yom Hazikaron. Then, the students watched a video of a mother speaking about her son (an American *oleh* or immigrant) who was killed in 1982 by Hizballah. After the video, the girls walked (35 minutes) to Mount Herzl, where they participated in a brief ceremony honoring the memory of fallen Israeli soldiers.

On *Yom Ha-atzma-ut*, the *Michlallah* students visited *Kastel* and *Givat Hatakhmoshet* (Ammunition Hill). Upon their return to the campus, they “had a big barbecue on the lawn, played cards and Frisbee.” The students all thought it was “a very nice day” and a good way to celebrate Israeli Independence Day.

Israeli Support to *Tochnit Yod Gimmel*

As noted earlier, the *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* post-high school program was developed with the support and guidance of the Torah Education Department of the WZO. The Department helped recruit the participants, made available applications for admission to the various yeshivot and seminaries, processed the applications, helped with the collection of tuition payments, and organized the flight arrangements. Moreover, the Torah Department supplied specifically prepared applications to the “partner” yeshivot and seminaries—Kerem B'Yavneh, Bet Midrash Le Torah, Machon Gold, Har Etzion, Sha'alavim, Yeshivat Hakotel, and several more. In 1995, the arrangement or “contract” between the Torah Department and the Israeli institutions was

terminated, because the Israeli schools opened their own offices in North America for recruiting students, processing applications, conducting interviews, collecting tuition, and arranging flights to Israel. A major source of support for Tochnit Yod Gimmel from 1968 to 1990 was the Minhal Studentim, headed by former NY Consul, Haim Zohar.

Program Success

The modern Orthodox Zionist yeshivot and seminaries enjoy an excellent reputation in the modern Orthodox community in North America and elsewhere. They are considered highly successful. According to American high school principals, many of whom regularly visit the Israeli institutions in which their graduates study, instruction is effective and often superior. Students and parents are generally happy. When asked about the post-high school program in Israel, one parent, a travel agent who knows Israel well and whose daughter participated in Tochnit Yod Gimmel in 2000-2001 responded: "It is the best thing that Israel can do for Diaspora teenagers and Diaspora Jewry. Given the very positive impact of the year-long study in Israel on the Jewish Zionist values of our youth, it is the best possible program for the benefit of Jewish education and the Jewish people." "Graduates" of these programs usually recommend the schools in which they studied to their younger classmates and siblings. Indeed, the spread of the Tochnit Yod Gimmel is due, in large measure, to the quality of the programs.

The success of Tochnit Yod Gimmel, it must be emphasized, is due to five factors:

1. The nature of the student body. The students who enroll either come committed or become committed to serious Judaic study.
2. Parents of students take a deep interest in their welfare and in their progress.
3. The admission process, including personal interviews of students and parents, is intensive and thorough and helps ensure proper selection and placement of students.
4. The instructors, maggidei-shiur, rashei yeshiva and program directors take a personal interest in their students. They consider it their personal-professional mission to help "raise a generation of b'nai Torah and b'not Torah."
5. The unique Jewish- Israeli spiritual-cultural environment of the yeshivot and seminaries.

There is a direct relationship between the success of *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* — its impact upon participants — and their prior educational background. Ideals and concerns central to the Diaspora educational process are reinforced by the atmosphere of the Israeli programs.

An examination of the effect of Zionist *yeshiva* study upon 315 young participants a full year after the conclusion of a year's study in Israel showed that there was a very slight "drop off" in areas of commitment to Torah study and plans to move to Israel. On the whole, the spiritual-cultural changes that occurred during the year of study in Israel remained. This explains the relatively large percentage of olim from among the American Tochnit Yod Gimmel participants.

The 2001-2002 year of study in Israel clearly demonstrates that the success of the post-high school Yeshiva program derives, in large measure, from the commitment and attitude of yeshiva high school graduates and their parents to Torah study and Israel. While the Intifada caused very serious declines in the number of Jewish youth participants and adult Jewish visitation from the United States to Israel for short-term and long-term

programs in 2001, and while some organizations hesitated to promote Israel based programs and a major American Jewish movement even cancelled youth trips to Israel, the post-high school yeshiva program continued unabated.

Interestingly, many of the students who did not come to Israel in September 2001 decided to enroll in the spring semester 2002. During an interview on January 22, 2002, that I arranged with 24 American female students in Orthodox Zionist seminaries in a restaurant where they were the guests of the parents of one of the students, the students were asked if they knew of any girls “back home in Greater New York” who decided not to come to Israel in September 2001 because of the Intifada. The students burst out in laughter when they heard this question and pointed to the end of the long table around which they were seated. Sitting at the end of the table were three Jewish day high school graduates who did not come in September, but “just came three days ago for the spring semester.”

Most of the Zionist *yeshivot* and seminaries reported an increase in enrollment in 2001-2002. During the winter and spring months of 2001 yeshiva high school seniors and their parents seriously considered the problems related to attending school in Israel in the 2001-2002 school year: the safety of the participants, the unrest in many parts of the country, and the need to curtail some educational trips. Yet, they decided en masse to enroll in the programs of their choice. In order to insure the safety of their students, yeshivot and seminaries took special measures to guarantee their well-being, such as restricting travel, providing extra security in the schools, and even requiring students to have cell phones —all this to make sure that the programs would continue without problems.

As part of my research, I interviewed individual students and groups of students studying in Orthodox Zionist yeshivot and seminaries. One of the questions I asked in the interviews was, “What are the reasons you came even during the time of unrest in Israel?” The answers included: “Every Jewish boy and girl should study in Israel,” “As observant Jews, it is incumbent upon us to visit and study in Israel as often as we can as long as we can, if we do not live in Israel,” “It is a mitzvah,” “This is what we were taught to do at home and in school it’s the thing to do,” “Every graduate — almost every graduate of American Yeshiva high schools — does it.”

Parents and grandparents (this writer among them), for their part, continue to visit their children and grandchildren regularly, thus providing an important source of adult visitation to the Jewish state. Parental and grandparent visits are a regular feature of the Orthodox Israel study program.

An example of the commitment of Orthodox Zionist parents and their teenage daughters and sons to study in Israel is underscored by the fact that hundreds of students returned to the United States for the Pesah holiday and, despite the rampant terror and escalation of violence, virtually all of them returned to Israel after Passover. The April 3 issue of the Jerusalem Post featured a magazine article entitled “Remaining Faithful, Thousands of Orthodox Youths From North America Defy Terror Warnings To Study In Israel.”

And, it must be underscored, the principals and teachers in the Jewish day high schools in the US and Canada continue to promote Tochnit Yod Gimmel via meetings with groups of students and parents and individual students and parents. Each of the American Zionist yeshiva high schools in Greater New York sponsor annual Israel nights for parents and students in which representatives of the selected seminaries and yeshivot come and speak. These evening programs are coordinated in the New York area by the Board of Jewish Education

of Greater New York.

Another measure of the success of *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* is the *aliyah* of former students. A survey made by the Minhal Studentim in 1990 of the Israel study participants in 1970-1971 showed that 33 percent had made *aliyah*. A meeting of hesder yeshiva leaders in January 2002 with this writer came to the conclusion that about 45 percent of all former hesder yeshiva students have made *aliyah*. According to Rabbi Meir Brayer, 452 Yod Gimmel participants in Yeshivot HAr Etzion — about one third of all former students — have made *aliyah* since the Har Etzion program began in 1971.

Beyond 2002

As for the future, there is every indication that the program will continue to grow as the yeshiva and Jewish day high school populations in North America increase and as new schools join the list of yeshivot that maximize the number of graduates participating in long-term Zionist study in Israel. Moreover, since the majority of students in Zionist Orthodox yeshivot and seminaries spend two years in intensive Judaic study, some of the Israeli institutions want to add pedagogic content to their programs to prepare students to teach when they return to the Diaspora. This would be helpful in relieving the teacher shortage in Jewish all-day and supplementary schools in the respective communities of the students who complete the pedagogic program.

In sum, when viewing the history, development, status and impact of *Tochnit Yod Gimmel* upon participants in Israeli Orthodox Zionist yeshivot and seminaries, the success of the program is impressive and its value significant. Yet, there are a variety of challenges that face Jewish Zionist education. They speak both to American and Israeli educators. And, the challenges suggest important agenda items for discussion and action. One of the major challenges is preparing students in Israel when they return to the States to counter anti-Zionist activity on the campuses.

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