

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 stable 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 ground-breakers 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 congregations 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.