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JEWISH IMMIGRANTS, LIBERAL HIGHER EDUCATION, AND THE QUEST FOR A TORAH U-MADDA CURRICULUM AT YESHIVA COLLEGE

In December of 1986, as part of Yeshiva University's centenary celebration, President Norman Lamm launched the Torah u-Madda Project, under the directorship of Dr. Jacob J. Schacter. Admitting that when he was an undergraduate in 1945, "it was an already established tradition for students to complain about the lack of precise definition of what Yeshiva University stands for," Lamm hoped that the initiative would alleviate matters and finally provide a sense of clarity to the issue.¹ Although it had several outcomes, the literature that resulted from this initiative rebuffed claims that Yeshiva College (YC), the University's men's liberal arts undergraduate program, was founded to serve as a vocational training center.² In his Editor's Introduction to the inaugural volume of *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, Schacter marshaled several documentary sources that revealed the liberal intentions of Yeshiva College's first president, Dr. Bernard Revel, to construct the curriculum from a "harmonious union" of Jewish and secular learning.³ One year later, in a book-length treatment of the subject, President Lamm's position accorded with Schacter's view. "Revel limned the institutional integration of Torah study with the wide universes of secular knowledge as exemplified by American institutions of higher education," wrote Lamm. "As Revel developed it, the

¹ Yaron Lebowitz, "Project to Clarify Torah U'Mada," *The Commentator*, December 10, 1986, 1.

² For example, see Simmy Lauer, "Commentator Symposium Explores Concept of Synthesis," *The Commentator*, December 28, 1977, p. 1.

³ Jacob J. Schacter, "Torah U-Madda Revisited: The Editor's Introduction," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 1 (1989), p. 6.

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student of Torah would be exposed on a daily basis and within the same precincts to both intensive Torah study and a university curriculum.” Lamm’s research of the school’s history revealed that Yeshiva College had always encouraged “the thinking individual” with the “assistance of the examples of appropriate rabbis and teachers, to perform within his mind and personality the essential synthesis of the teachings that made up Torah Umadda.”⁴

Yet, despite the rhetoric that appeared in public relations materials and in newspaper interviews, Yeshiva College’s synthesized curriculum was not exactly one of “harmonious blending.” At the same time, it was certainly never meant to be merely a vocational school. Bernard Revel was not alone in the effort to establish the set of courses in which the pioneering Yeshiva Collegians would enroll. The men who advised Yeshiva’s first president raised critical issues about the fusion of Jewish and secular studies in a liberal arts school. They challenged Revel to reconsider his vision several times over, and the result yielded a nuanced educational philosophy. A careful analysis of the steps leading to the formation of the Yeshiva College curriculum reveals a more complex vision of Yeshiva’s Torah u-Madda ideology than has hitherto been considered and allows contemporary practitioners of Torah u-Madda to better understand the ideology as it stands today.

The twenties was a crucial decade for Jews and American education, particularly regarding post-secondary education. During these interwar years, a Jewish child felt at home in the New York public school. At the onset of the 1920s, it was projected that more than one out of every two public high school students was a Jewish immigrant or the child of an immigrant Jew.⁵ Upon graduating high school, however, Jewish youth had only a few options. Before the Great Depression, a Jewish youngster could get a job, usually in the industrial sector. However, a New York Jewish youth with sights on higher education was limited in options due to strict Jewish quotas enforced at Columbia University and other private colleges.⁶ Therefore, many Jewish males enrolled in the City College of New York (CCNY), where it was figured that nearly 80 percent of the

⁴ Norman Lamm, *Torah Umadda: The Encounter of Religious Learning and Worldly Knowledge in the Jewish Tradition* (Northvale: Aronson, 1990), pp. 34-35.

⁵ Stephan F. Brumberg, *Going to America, Going to School: The Jewish Immigrant Public School Encounter in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p. 3.

⁶ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 84-88.

student body was Jewish in the 1920s. Similarly, the sisters of these CCNY collegians hoped to gain admission to Hunter College, where nearly 40 percent of the students were born into Jewish families.⁷ This trend only intensified during the Depression era, when Americans were faced with limited options for employment. “You either got into City College or you looked for a job in the Post Office,” recalled one memoirist reflecting on this most tumultuous period.⁸

Aware of the dearth of options for Jews in higher education, several individuals encouraged other Jewish leaders and philanthropists to consider establishing a college for Jews.⁹ The nineteenth century witnessed the founding of hundreds of colleges throughout the United States by various Protestant groups. However, by the 1920s, most of these schools had either become virtually secularized or had ceased to exist.¹⁰ Accordingly, most supporters of a Jewish college or university did not have sectarianism in mind. Rather, they advocated for the creation of a Jewish college that accepted both Jews and non-Jews, with a curriculum free of any specifically Jewish content. A few advocated for a strong department of Judaic studies, but their rationale had more to do with securing posts for Jewish academics than anything bordering on sectarianism. The lone exception was Dr. Bernard Revel, president of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS).

Placed at the helm of RIETS in 1915, Revel immediately implemented changes to modernize the Orthodox Jewish rabbinical school. Courses in homiletics and Jewish history were added to the traditional Talmud learning so as to churn out more worldly and capable Orthodox rabbis. In 1916, Revel founded a high school division for his growing institution “in which the regular high school studies as prescribed by the Board of Education of the City of New York for the city high schools are taught.”¹¹

⁷ Sherry Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor: Education in New York, 1880-1924* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981), p. 123.

⁸ A.M. Rosenthal, “Of Course, It Is all Quite Obvious As to Why I Am So Moved,” in *City at the Center: A Collection of Writings by CCNY Alumni and Faculty*, ed. Betty Rizzo and Barry Wallenstein (New York: City College of New York, 1983), p. 67. I thank Dr. Jeffrey S. Gurock for pointing out this memoir essay and quotation to me.

⁹ See Louis I. Newman, *A Jewish University in America?: With a Symposium of Opinions by Educators, Editors and Publicists, and a Bibliography on the Jewish Question in American Colleges* (New York: Bloch Pub., 1923).

¹⁰ Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 337.

¹¹ See *Rabbinical College of America Register 5678 (1917-1918)* (New York, 1917), p. 9.

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Finally, in December, 1923, Revel announced plans to establish his Orthodox brand of liberal learning, the Yeshiva College.

Despite a very successful fundraising campaign, Revel was unsure whether the construction of his new college campus in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood would be completed by the fall of 1928, the target date for the opening of Yeshiva College.¹² Therefore, in the spring of 1927 Bernard Revel wrote to the Committee on Curriculum of the City College of New York, requesting that City College partner with Revel to educate the first crop of YC students. It was always the intention that Yeshiva College students learn alongside the older RIETS rabbinical students in the mornings. There, in the cramped school building located on the Lower East Side at 302 East Broadway, Yeshiva College students would spend the first portion of their day, until 3 p.m., studying Talmud. Indeed, according to the school's first mission statement, a student's dedication to Judaism and its sacred texts was a prerequisite for admission:

The Yeshiva College dedicates its energies to the education of select groups of Jewish young men. It aims to educate liberally as well as Jewishly, young men who have already been imbued with the spirit and the sanctity of Judaism and its teachings, and who consider the complete understanding of the culture and the faith of historic Judaism an essential part of the equipment to be acquired during their College years.¹³

In fact, it was Revel's hope that the time a Yeshiva College student would devote to the analytical study of Talmud would aid him in his liberal arts education, not take away valuable time for study:

The Yeshiva College believes that an understanding of the background of Judaism and its contribution to human progress, will quicken the student's insight into his liberal studies. It aims to foster this harmonious growth in which the bases of modern knowledge and culture in the fields of art, science, and service, are blended with the bases of Jewish culture, so that its students may be trained in the spirit of intelligent and

¹² On Yeshiva College's early fundraising, see Gilbert Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University: The First Jewish University in America* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), pp. 155-61; Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), pp. 74-93; and Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and America Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 91.

¹³ *Yeshiva College Catalogue* (1928-1929), p. 7.

high-minded enthusiasm, and develop as informed and devoted sons in the spirit and faith of Israel, able to recognize the essential harmony of life.¹⁴

The proposal sent to CCNY, therefore, concerned only the afternoon, when Yeshiva College students were to engage in the liberal arts section of their day. Heretofore, Revel had made a few public remarks on curricular issues in the months after announcing plans to establish Yeshiva College. Classes in Bible, Hebrew, Jewish history, philosophy and ethics were all to be required courses. Save for these subjects, the YC curriculum was to “differ little from that of other colleges.”¹⁵ The CCNY proposal was the first time Revel put into writing the subjects he considered to be integral to liberal arts learning.

In what therefore serves as the earliest conception of the Yeshiva College curriculum, Revel picked out “courses of a liberal character” offered at RIETS, proposing that they be grouped together with a host of CCNY courses to form a heavily Jewish liberal arts undergraduate curriculum. The RIETS courses would form the Jewish backbone of this synthesized curriculum while classes at CCNY would provide students with the broader context of liberal arts. Eventually, Revel hoped, both sides of the curriculum would be housed at “Yeshiva College, which will take over and amplify these liberal courses.”¹⁶

In Revel’s proposal, courses in liberal learning would be split between general humanities courses and Judaica subjects. For example, a Yeshiva student would take four survey courses in philosophy and ethics at CCNY and another two courses in Medieval Jewish philosophy and Jewish ethics at RIETS. In addition, arguing that “an understanding of the Hebrew language is the key to the wide culture and spiritual forces which have shaped and are helping to shape the course of civilization,” Revel asked that the CCNY committee consider accepting RIETS classes in Hebrew grammar and phonology to supplement introductory language courses at CCNY. It was put forward that classes in Bible, post-biblical Jewish literature and Hebrew poetry be counted along with CCNY classes in classic Greek works to form a literature requirement. As for a history requirement, Revel petitioned that some CCNY classes in Western history be combined with RIETS courses in Medieval and American Jewish history, as the RIETS courses “touch upon almost the entire range of Jewish relationship with the nations of the Civilized World.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Proposal from Bernard Revel to The Committee on Curriculum of the City College of New York, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-27, Yeshiva University Archives.

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Perhaps the most practical courses for Revel's students in this plan would be those in public speaking and sociology. Owing to the fact that many of the Yeshiva students were immigrants who found it difficult to articulate themselves in English, Revel proposed a robust three-year curriculum of courses in public speaking, wherein students would enroll in speech courses at both RIETS and CCNY each semester. These courses were designed to correct "accent and faulty speech habits," "develop a correct, convincing and attractive style of oral delivery" and to prepare Yeshiva students "for extemporaneous talks in English." The sociology requirement was just as pragmatic. Yeshiva students would take courses in immigrant studies and social work at City College and two courses at RIETS that would acquaint students with American Jewish communal institutions, primarily those located in New York.¹⁷

However, the terms of Revel's plan were ultimately rejected by CCNY, due in large part to Revel's exclusion of any courses in mathematics and the sciences. Instead, CCNY's Committee on Curriculum agreed to permit Yeshiva students who had completed the listed RIETS courses to transfer to CCNY with a small number of credits to be used toward the completion of a City College undergraduate degree.¹⁸

With about a year until YC's targeted opening date, there was little time to restructure the CCNY proposal or locate another suitor. Revel's first move was to find a temporary space to hold classes. He quickly secured a few rooms at The Jewish Center, a large Orthodox synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side, where Yeshiva College classes were held from its official opening on September 25, 1928 until the end of the inaugural fall semester.¹⁹ In the meantime, however, Revel faced the urgency of hiring a faculty and, most importantly, developing an official curriculum for Yeshiva College.

Assembling a faculty was crucial for Revel, who envisioned "a small college, with a body of select students" and a sufficient number of professors to "maintain that close personal contact between faculty and students which stimulates thought and helps to build character."²⁰ As it turned out, though, Revel was very fortunate in his quest to enlist faculty

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ See Minutes of the Liberal Arts & Sciences Committee on Curriculum, May 4, 1927, Archives and Special Collections of CCNY; and *Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the College of the City of New York* (1927), pp. 254-55.

¹⁹ Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University*, p. 161; Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel*, p. 83.

²⁰ *Yeshiva College Catalogue* (1928-1929), pp. 7-8.

members. Yeshiva's Manhattan location served him well in this task. Revel managed to recruit professors and rabbis who held Ph.Ds from around the New York area. Very quickly, Revel secured a roster of thirteen full- and part-time faculty members, many of whom previously taught or taught concurrently at City College. Further, Revel did not need to search for anyone to teach the Jewish studies courses, as his esteemed RIETS faculty was more than competent enough to lecture on those subjects. Still, Revel did try to persuade a few notable figures to teach Judaica classes, including the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham I. Kook, albeit unsuccessfully.²¹

Developing a suitable curriculum proved the most difficult task for the Yeshiva President. One of the first individuals Revel sought out to assist him in constructing the curriculum was Dr. Nathan Isaacs, professor of Business Law at Harvard University. Isaacs was well acquainted with varying models of college curricula, having taught at the University of Cincinnati, University of Pittsburgh and Columbia University before accepting his post at Harvard. In addition, Isaacs was attuned to the needs and concerns of Jewish college students, having served as president of the Menorah Educational Conference—an organization dedicated to fostering Jewish education on college campuses—since 1918.²² Revel started soliciting Isaacs's advice in building a set of general requirements in April of 1928, a year after the CCNY proposal fell through.²³ Isaacs congratulated Revel for “having brought things so far” in the preparation for the new college and offered his help in curricular matters and faculty recruitment.²⁴

In June, Revel, proving that he had learned his lesson from the CCNY experience, reviewed with Isaacs a planned course in General Science. Revel also informed Isaacs of his plan to frame the Yeshiva College curriculum around a course in Contemporary Civilizations, a class made

²¹ “Tentative Faculty of the Department of Jewish Studies,” Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-20. For Rabbi Kook's relationship with Yeshiva prior to the establishment of Yeshiva College, see Natan Ophir, “Rav Kook and Dr. Revel: A Shared Vision for a Central University?,” *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 15 (2008-09), pp. 188-208.

²² Elcanan Isaacs, “Nathan Isaacs,” in *Men of the Spirit*, ed. Leo Jung (New York: Kymson, 1964), 579-80.

²³ Bernard Revel to Nathan Isaacs, April 30, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26, Yeshiva University Archives. See also Bernard Revel to Nathan Isaacs, May 11, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 3-20B.

²⁴ Nathan Isaacs to Bernard Revel, May 3, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

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famous in recent years by Dr. John Erskine at Columbia College. The Yeshiva College version of the course would be a “survey of the various elements in life today,” focusing on philosophy, psychology, government, economics and foundations of law. Although Revel claimed in his letter that “the aim of the Yeshiva College [is] to secure as members of the faculty either non-Jews or Jews who share the views of the Yeshiva,” it was clear that he preferred that Jewish scholars teach this important gateway course. Already one prominent Jewish scholar, Dr. Isaac Husik, a philosophy professor at the University of Pennsylvania, had agreed to co-teach the course. Revel hoped that Isaacs would agree to be the other instructor.²⁵ In reply, Isaacs told Revel that the outline for the Contemporary Civilizations course “seems excellent,” but declined Revel’s invitation, explaining that outside teaching was against Harvard’s policy.²⁶

Concurrently, Revel was assembling the Yeshiva College Council, a group of distinguished academics and philanthropists to advise and oversee the formation of the Yeshiva College curriculum. Among the Council’s laymen were Rabbi Herbert S. Goldstein, Nathan Lamport, Samuel Levy and Charles A. Silver. The prominent academics on the advisory board were Isaacs, Revel, President Fredrick B. Robinson of City College, Dr. David Eugene Smith of Columbia Teachers College and Dr. Charles Torrey of Yale University.²⁷ Revel hoped that these influential men would help him devise a curriculum to foster “a harmonious development in which the bases of modern knowledge and culture in the fields of art, science, and service are blended with the bases of Jewish culture.”²⁸ With considerable prescience, Revel worked hard to convince President Robinson to join the Council. Robinson would be most influential in the creation of the curriculum. In his initial invitation to the CCNY President, Revel implicitly stressed that Yeshiva College would in no wise be in competition for Jewish students who would otherwise enroll at City College. “The Yeshiva College will be small at the start,” wrote Revel. “It is our expectation that it will remain small, and our hope is that it will prove effective.”²⁹ After several weeks had gone by without a response, Revel

²⁵ Bernard Revel to Nathan Isaacs, June 5, 1928, Moses L. Isaacs Papers, Box 30, Folder 1-84, Yeshiva University Archives.

²⁶ Nathan Isaacs to Bernard Revel, June 6, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

²⁷ *Yeshiva College Catalogue* (1928-1929), p. 5.

²⁸ Bernard Revel to Nathan Lamport, September 7, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

²⁹ Bernard Revel to Fredrick B. Robinson, June 6, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

again wrote to Robinson, this time appealing to his seniority and experience in higher education:

Knowing your most able and progressive work and your wide vision in the field of higher education, and the extent of your interest in and friendliness toward the Yeshiva and its College, we look forward to the valuable advice you will be able to give in the formative days of the Yeshiva College.³⁰

In truth, at this point Robinson had not had very much presidential experience. He was announced as the fifth president of City College of New York on March 27, 1927. Still, Robinson had over a decade of administrative experience at CCNY, serving first as director of the Division of Vocational Subjects and Civic Administration and then dean of the New School of Business.³¹ One of the many individuals to pass on good wishes to Robinson shortly after his presidential appointment was Dr. Shelley R. Safir, a proud alumnus of City College and a member of Bernard Revel's inner circle. At the time, Safir was the principal of Yeshiva's high school and destined to become the first dean of Yeshiva College. "Permit me to express my hearty congratulations upon your election as president of the College," wrote Safir. "I am sure that the College, under your guidance, is on the eve of a new era of progress and expansion, and that in this development your administrative genius will play no little part."³²

Safir was correct. Within the first year of his administration, President Robinson organized a committee to consider general revisions to the City College curriculum. Student leaders at City College had been calling for a review of the curriculum since 1913, when the most recent changes were made to the course requirements.³³ On April 26, 1928, Robinson's

³⁰ Bernard Revel to Fredrick B. Robinson, June 27, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26. Robinson accepted Revel's invitation, explaining that the lateness in his reply was due to the time necessary to ask permission from the CCNY Board of Trustees. See Fredrick B. Robinson to Bernard Revel, July 2, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

³¹ For Robinson's various administrative appointments at CCNY, see Willis Rudy, *The College of the City of New York: A History, 1847-1947* (New York: City College Press, 1949), pp. 361, 371, 380.

³² Shelley R. Safir to Fredrick B. Robinson, March 31, 1927, CCNY Papers, Box 30, Folder 1-61, Yeshiva University Archives. Safir and Robinson kept a correspondence well into Robinson's tenure as president. See, for example, Shelley R. Safir to Fredrick B. Robinson, February 14, 1928, CCNY Papers, Box 30, Folder 1-61; and Fredrick B. Robinson, February 17, 1928, CCNY Papers, Box 30, Folder 1-61.

³³ Rudy, *The College of the City of New York*, p. 394.

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committee successfully submitted a proposal to the school's Board of Trustees, suggesting that the curriculum be neatly divided into four groups:

- (a) A group prescribed for candidates for all degrees, to include courses calculated to provide the tools of the scholar of collegiate standing and to impart broad, general knowledge essential and basic to liberal education.
- (b) A group forming a background for the particular degree sought, there being three such groups leading respectively toward the degree of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Science in Social Science.
- (c) A specialization or concentration group calculated to make the student competent in some particular field of endeavor.
- (d) Free electives to stimulate interest in diverse fields of intellectual endeavor. In this group may be included any course in the catalogue of the College not allocated to one of the preceding three groups.³⁴

The new curriculum resolved several issues. A year-long survey course in General Science became mandatory, in addition to survey courses in art and music. Students majoring in the sciences were now required to fulfill more requirements in the humanities. More broadly, however, the new curriculum further locked students into a standard course of study with relatively minimal leeway to enroll in elective courses. The first group of requirements – intended to impart “general” and “essential” knowledge – was in reality meant to fulfill a dual role: to provide the basics of a liberal education and to continue the process of Americanization that began in the public schools. Therefore, courses in mathematics, physical and social sciences (included here were classes in economics, government, sociology, and history), foreign languages (Latin or modern languages) and English literature constituted just half of the general education requirement at City College.³⁵

The other portion of the general requirements was a continuation of the practical training students had received in their public school years. Public education was viewed by both teachers and parents as the most effective method to socialize New York's vast population of immigrant

³⁴ Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the College of the City of New York, April 26, 1928, pp. 208-12, Archives and Special Collections of the City College of New York. The committee's proposal is reproduced in full in Rudy, *The College of the City of New York*, pp. 209-14.

³⁵ Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, pp. 176-81.

and second-generation American youth.³⁶ It was the prevailing theory that upon completion of twelve years of elementary and secondary education, a student from the Lower East Side's "gilded ghetto" or the Brownsville section of Brooklyn was fully ready to find a decent English-speaking job. Students looking to continue into higher education knew that CCNY was the school where they could become even more American. Consequently, each City College student received instruction in elementary English writing composition, fundamentals of public speaking, and three years of hygiene. With the inclusion of these pragmatic courses, there was no room remaining for liberal arts gateway courses like a Contemporary Civilizations survey in a CCNY student's schedule.

City College's core requirements accounted for sixty of the 128 total undergraduate credits. Depending on the particular degree sought, a student might have had to accumulate as many as 48 credits to complete his major field of study. That left twenty credits "to be freely elected from the entire list of college courses." CCNY's rigid curriculum was contrary to ones found at most colleges across the United States. By the end of the 1920s, the freewheeling elective system originally championed by President Charles Elliot of Harvard had paved inroads into countless American colleges.³⁷ Even Columbia College, where faculty resisted the trend toward elective course reform, was far more flexible than CCNY.³⁸ Still, Robinson and other CCNY officials deeply believed that their set of requirements was none too overbearing for a student body of mostly immigrants and sons of immigrants who required more guidance than American born collegians.

Revel and Shelley R. Safir, then serving as Secretary of the Yeshiva College Faculty, agreed with the underlying principles that informed the CCNY curriculum. Although Revel remained steadfast in his commitment to provide liberal arts learning for its own sake to Orthodox Jews, he well understood his community's situation in America. An immigrant

³⁶ Stephan F. Brumberg, *Going to America, Going to School: The Jewish Immigrant Public School Encounter in Turn of the Century New York City* (New York: Praeger, 1986), p. 14.

³⁷ On Eliot's high regard for the elective system and its impact on higher education, see Christopher J. Lucas, *American Higher Education: A History, Second Edition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 172; Hugh Hawkins, *Between Harvard and America: The Educational Leadership of Charles W. Eliot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 191-201; and LeBaron R. Briggs, "President Eliot, as Seen by a Disciple," *Atlantic Monthly* 144 (November, 1929), p. 597.

³⁸ Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 286-88; and Gorelick, *City College and the Jewish Poor*, pp. 165-70.

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himself, Revel knew that his small college must also prepare students for a vocation after college graduation. When it came time to furnish a curriculum, therefore, Revel and Safir used the City College model as a template for theirs. Safir, in particular, spent many hours discussing curricular plans with Robinson, and it showed when YC printed its first course catalogue several months into the fall semester.³⁹ Similar to CCNY, Yeshiva College would also require students to fulfill 128 total points in order to graduate. Likewise, the general requirements at YC tallied sixty points. However, whereas the CCNY men took foreign language courses in each year of college, Revel's students completed just a few semesters worth of languages, lending more time to instruction in public speaking and writing composition. Revel also left out mandatory courses in music and art so that his students could spend more time in education, history, philosophy, and psychology classes.⁴⁰

Where Yeshiva College and City College differed most was in respect to major fields of study. In order to satisfy the mission of the school, Yeshiva College mandated that students take classes in the Department of Jewish and Semitic Studies. The courses included Bible, Hebrew Language, and Judaic oriented classes in Education, Literature, History, Ethics, and Philosophy. Although Jewish studies was considered an integral part of the Yeshiva general curriculum and not necessarily a concentrated field of study, YC required that students fulfill about fifty credits of Jewish studies courses, nearly equivalent to the number of courses for a CCNY student to complete his major.⁴¹

As for a major, Yeshiva College offered seven fields of concentrated study: Classical Language and Civilization, Modern Foreign Language and Literature, English Language and Literature, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, History and Social Sciences, Philosophy, and Ethics and Jewish and Semitic Studies. Students were to fulfill twelve credits in each of the two paired up majors. Presumably, every field came as a pair of subjects because no department offered enough courses on its own.⁴² Finally, the last four or five credits necessary to graduate from YC, even fewer than the remaining elective credits at CCNY, were left to the discretion of the students.

The Yeshiva College curriculum was more rigid than City College's in other ways, as well. At YC, specific general requirements were tracked year by year. For example, mathematics, science, and all speech and composition courses were taken during a student's freshman and sophomore years.

³⁹ Fredrick B. Robinson to Bernard Revel, October 15, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-18.

⁴⁰ *Yeshiva College Catalogue* (1928-1929), pp. 13-14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Humanities courses—both secular and Jewish—were unavailable for a student until he was an upperclassman. It was Revel’s intention that the Freshman Year would be marked by courses that were “basic for the further pursuit of study.” The elementary courses in English writing and speaking were designed with the European immigrant in mind, “to give training in the correct and effective use of English” and to develop regular “speech habits.”⁴³ Sophomore Year was more of the same subjects at more advanced levels, aimed to equip a student “with the tools of study” and “acquainting him with the facts of life.” This system of graduated course tracking did not exist at CCNY.

In addition, in contradistinction to the CCNY philosophy, the YC underclassman’s education was highlighted by a humanities gateway course that would prepare the young man for the rigorous coursework which lay ahead in his final two years at Yeshiva. This “Outline of Civilization” class for all freshmen students was an outgrowth of the discussions Revel had with Nathan Isaacs, when the two men were first conceiving the YC curriculum. The humanities-centered foundational course was a team-taught survey, “presenting the history of man’s progress” through the prisms of history, ethics, economics, sociology, and human nature. At a Yeshiva College Council meeting held shortly after the completion of the school’s first year, Robinson successfully convinced Revel that the “Civilization” course “required greater maturity” than could be expected of YC students. Instead, entering students should spend more time mastering topics in the sciences. By the start of the fall semester, “Outline of Civilization” was pushed back to the second year of study.⁴⁴ That the course continued to serve as a valued check-point in the YC curriculum, however, is informative. Although Revel found Robinson’s views and the CCNY style of vocationally centered education very appealing for his students, he was nevertheless incorrigible in his vision to provide his students with a humanities focused liberal education.

That liberal arts education really began in the second half of the YC student’s career, after he had completed the “vocational” aspects of his training. Indeed, if freshmen and sophomore Yeshiva students were unaware of Revel’s proclivity for the humanities, they were clued in soon enough. Upon graduating to his junior year, a Yeshiva student was expected to be fully prepared for the “core” of his liberal learning. The undergraduate was no longer required to enroll in math or science courses, considered by Revel to be necessary subjects but not essential to liberal learning. After the Sophomore Year, the YC student was likewise

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the Yeshiva College Council, June 9, 1929, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-26.

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finished with remedial English language classes. Instead, students dedicated their final two years to intensive study of education, literature, philosophy, and psychology. By “emphasiz[ing] the humanities” in this prime stage of its curriculum, Yeshiva College hoped to “secure both breadth and depth of thought” for its students as well as provide them with a secularly “spiritual outlook” on life.⁴⁵ The secondary role that mathematics and the natural sciences played in the Yeshiva College curriculum was reminiscent of the proposal Revel had made to City College’s Committee on Curriculum just one year earlier. Back then, Revel envisioned a general curriculum that intentionally omitted courses in the Natural Sciences, preferring instead to focus on the humanities. Now, as he was constructing his own curriculum, Revel had conceded that science must play a role in higher education, but made sure that role would be minimal. Indeed, when Revel spoke of a “harmonious blending” of Jewish and secular knowledge, he had the humanities—those subjects that best complemented Jewish offerings in literature, history and philosophy—in mind.

One feature noticeably missing from the humanities offerings was any emphasis on synthetic courses that attempted to bridge the gap between Jewish and secular studies. No doubt, Robinson was involved in dissuading Yeshiva’s administration from implementing any of these amalgamated courses. He feared that a break from the traditional syllabi used at other colleges would discredit Yeshiva College’s attempt to become a bona fide school of secular higher education. So wary of this was Robinson that he cautioned the use of ambiguous language in the inaugural catalogue that could mislead others to doubt Yeshiva College’s authenticity. Thus, in a letter to Revel, Robinson took issue with a sentence in the “General Statement” section of the catalogue that claimed that it was Yeshiva College’s aim “to educate liberally as well as Jewishly.”⁴⁶ Robinson advised that the sentence be rewritten as: “The intent is that the College will provide a liberal general education and at the same time stress Jewish culture.”⁴⁷ While most of Robinson’s suggestions were accepted by Revel, this one was not.

To be sure, several courses at Yeshiva College merged Jewish and secular topics. For example, the description of one intermediate English literature course included works from “the most important American authors” as well as the *Authorized King James Version* of the Bible. An

⁴⁵ *Yeshiva College Catalogue* (1928-1929), p. 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Fredrick B. Robinson to Bernard Revel, October 15, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-18.

advanced math course pledged that in its classes “attention will also be given to the Jewish contribution to mathematics.” Comparisons between Greek, Roman, and Jewish traditions were also slated to come up in class discussions in courses offered by the Classics and Education divisions of Yeshiva College. One member of the advisory board, David Eugene Smith of Teachers College, found this fusion of disciplines “simply splendid.” In his words, the catalogue “contains and expresses a spirit that I wish might be found in college catalogues issued by institutions of other faiths.” Smith punctuated his praise, stating that “it is a great thing, in this generation, to see such an institution as the Yeshiva stating clearly and boldly its fundamental faith and principles.”⁴⁸ Others, however, expected more of these courses, and encouraged Yeshiva College administrators to think more creatively. Nathan Isaacs reported to Bernard Revel that he had “examined the catalogue of the Yeshiva College with keen interest” and it was his advice that “a little more thought” should be given to the “Jewish aspects of the curriculum.” Isaacs acknowledged the several courses that dared to engage in Jewish-secular discussion, but was unsatisfied. “This is only the beginning,” he encouraged. “More of the same kind of thing will no doubt follow.”⁴⁹

However, Revel was reluctant to follow Isaacs’s suggestion. On the possibility of treating Jewish theology as an academic discipline, Revel was wholeheartedly opposed. “I do not, unfortunately, know of any man who can adequately treat Judaism as a whole,” Revel informed Isaacs. “Moreover,” continued Revel, “the comparative method which is essential to a scientific study of religion is not without serious danger to immature minds, for it often impresses them with the erroneous ideas that the spiritual and the ethical content of the various religions are fundamentally the same.” This alone, Revel believed, compromised the “uniqueness” and the “spiritual intensity” of traditional Judaism. Therefore, Revel refused to subject his students to the “hostile environment” of an authentic college course on religion.⁵⁰ One creative course proposal that crossed Revel’s desk sometime during the first years of Yeshiva College, a class on “Psychology and Religion,” was rejected for these reasons. Although the course’s ambitious syllabus covered the views of academics and both Jewish and non-Jewish theologians, Revel’s own notes on an

⁴⁸ David Eugene Smith to Bernard Revel, September 12, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 1-31.

⁴⁹ Nathan Isaacs to Bernard Revel, September 4, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-18.

⁵⁰ Bernard Revel to Nathan Isaacs, September 21, 1928, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 3-20B.

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archival copy of the syllabus indicate his reluctance to introduce this sort of course to his students.⁵¹

Shortly before the school held its first commencement exercises in 1932, Fredrick B. Robinson wrote to Bernard Revel in order to register his personal “expression of approval of the work which has been achieved at Yeshiva College thus far.” Robinson congratulated Yeshiva College on the “high level of intelligence” of its students, “and also the earnestness with which they make the best use of their time.” Robinson was “very happy” to have played a prominent role in the education of young men who “are meeting the standard of requirements of a general college culture course and at the same time pursuing additional studies in Hebrew and matters related to Jewish history and culture.” Finally, he pledged to do “whatever may be in my power to assist you in the further progress of your wholly admirable College.”⁵²

Despite Robinson’s offer, only some minor changes were made to the YC set of general requirements over the ensuing years. The curriculum that had emerged during the formative years of Yeshiva College catered to the needs of immigrant and first generation American Jews. At the same time, Revel believed that while sacrifices to the liberal studies were made for the sake of Americanizing the Yeshiva students, his curriculum nevertheless left ample opportunity for students to explore a humanities-centered liberal education. In the end, therefore, Robinson’s intimate understanding of immigrant higher education proved an invaluable resource to framing the YC curriculum. And, although Nathan Isaacs would later complain that that his suggestions for the curriculum were “invariably ignored,” he too played a major role in maintaining the liberal arts character of the curriculum.⁵³ All told, Bernard Revel’s College was not a vocational training center, nor was it meant to be an exemplar of American liberal arts education. It was, consciously and deliberately, somewhere in between.

⁵¹ Proposal from F. Schneersohn to Bernard Revel, u.d., Bernard Revel Papers, Box 36, Folder 1-20.

⁵² Fredrick B. Robinson to Bernard Revel, March 24, 1932, CCNY Papers, Box 30, Folder 1-61.

⁵³ Nathan Isaacs to Bernard Revel, March 26, 1937, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 3-20B. In fact, Isaacs’s frustrations with Yeshiva were evident from the school’s early goings. As early as 1929, he complained in a letter to Henry Hurwitz, the editor of the *Menorah Journal*. Frustrated with the caliber of the Yeshiva faculty, Isaacs wrote “I have fled from that crowd, refused to speak at their Commencement or to accept an honorary degree at their hands.” See Nathan Isaacs to Henry Hurwitz, February 6, 1929, Menorah Collection, Box 2722, “1927-1932” file. American Jewish Archives; also quoted in Paul Ritterband and Harold S. Wechsler, *Jewish Learning in American Universities: The First Century* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), p. 147.