

# The COMMENTATOR

The Independent Student Newspaper of Yeshiva College, Sy Syms School of Business, and Yeshiva University

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## Second Annual Chanukahfest a Glowing Success



By David Rubinstein

Nearly 1,000 students crowded the Furst Gymnasium on Wednesday night, December 21 for Chanukahfest, the annual Chanukah party hosted by the undergraduate student councils. The event featured various game stations, a chanukah menu, free giveaways, and recurring lottery prize drawings.

Inside the gym, students had a variety of arcade-style games to choose from. Among the attractions were a giant foosball table for sixteen players, an air hockey table, a

video game station, skeeball machines, basketball shooting games, and even a mini golf course.

Traditional holiday foods abounded on tables set up inside the gym and outside in the foyer. A latke bar offered four different varieties of the potato pancake. The creatively inclined could prepare their own *sufganiyot* (filled donuts) by injecting plain donuts with jelly, caramel, vanilla, or chocolate cream filling, topping off their snacks with sprinkles, chocolate chips, and other toppings. Hot chocolate, complete with the option for marshmallows, peppermint candy, cinnamon sticks, and whipped cream

SEE CHANUKAHFEST, CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

## Being a Jew at YU

By Lilly Gelman

If you, like me, follow the Yeshiva University Admissions page on Facebook, by now you would have seen the new ads stressing the unique religious experience on campus. YU has seemingly endless kosher food options, a plethora of Judaic studies courses, consistent Shabbat programming, and a schedule built around the Jewish holidays. As students of Yeshiva University, our college experience is not burdened by the stress of midterms during chaggim (Jewish holidays) or the inconvenience of extracurricular activities on Saturdays. On the surface, YU offers the impression of a religiously satisfying college experience, allowing the students to spend these four formative years focusing solely on their classes and extracurriculars without the worries of religious obligations. It appears to me, however, that what makes religious life at Yeshiva University effortless, is in fact one of the greatest challenges of attending this uniquely religious institution.

While it is unfair to speak from the perspective of Jewish students in secular college — as I currently attend YU, not Penn, Maryland, or Barnard — I can speak from the experience of growing up in a smaller Jewish community in Houston, which I believe may have some valuable similarities. We had one Modern Orthodox school,

**“WHAT MAKES RELIGIOUS LIFE AT YESHIVA UNIVERSITY EFFORTLESS, IS IN FACT ONE OF THE GREATEST CHALLENGES OF ATTENDING THIS UNIQUELY RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION.”**

one shul option in the neighborhood, and four kosher restaurants. Our religious questions pertained to the entire community. We as a community needed the school to thrive because without it, we would have no Modern Orthodox education for our youth. We collectively took on the responsibility of making minyanim (prayer quorums) during the week and learning the leining (Torah reading) for Shabbat because if we didn't, it wouldn't have happened. We supported the businesses that sold ko-

SEE BEING A JEW, CONTINUED ON PAGE 19



# The EDITORIAL

## Two Requests of The YU Board

By Doron Levine

The Yeshiva University Board of Trustees needs to be a bit less transparent. An opaque object, even if mysterious and unknowable, is at least perceptible to the eye; but the YU Board is as undetectable as pellucid glass. Any bird who's ever had the painful experience of flying into a window will understand what I'm saying. Better to be translucent and at least noticeable than transparent and not visible at all.

This is not a mindless screed against the Board, fired by millennial disdain for entrenched authority. While I do indeed harbor a natural distrust of authority, in my more judicious moments I recognize that this attitude is irrational. There's nothing inherently slimy about the few holding jurisdiction over the many (is there?) -- prudence and practicality actually recommend this sort of structure. And perspective matters; a governing group that we might perceive as an elitist oligarchy might just as well be viewed as a team of generous volunteers.

Especially when directed at members of YU's Board, reflexive cynicism is misguided. Board Members are, I presume, appointed because of their dedication to YU, and many, if not all, have made major contributions to our university, financial or otherwise. But conjectures on the considerations relevant to the appointment of trustees are just that—mere conjecture—because YU's Board of Trustees is utterly invisible. The public has no grasp of the qualifications necessary to become a Trustee and no handle on the process for appointing them because our Board has no channel for communication of its procedure and decisions. YU's supreme governing body is a closed book.

This sort of secrecy is unusual for university boards. Many other university websites offer biographical information on the members of their governing body -- YU offers nothing. Many other university boards make publicly available their history, meeting dates, agendas, minutes, committees, university charter, and bylaws -- YU's board provides none of these. I would venture to say that the publication of at least some of this information is pretty standard among American universities. A simple Google search will do the trick. (For a small sampling, visit the informative board webpages of these universities: Amherst, Brandeis, Columbia, Duke, Emory, Fordham, Georgetown, Harvard, Indiana State, Johns Hopkins, Kent State, Lehigh, Maryland, Middlebury, Notre Dame, NYU, Princeton, Purdue, Rockland Community College, Rutgers, Swarthmore, Syracuse, Vanderbilt, William and Mary, Xavier, and Yale.)

What do we know about YU's Board? Our university's website has a page which lists the members of the Board and specifies its Chairman, Vice Chairmen, Treasurer, and a number of honorary positions. That is all. No contact information is provided for any Trustees, not even for the Chairman of the Board, Moshael Straus. When and where does the Board meet? What happens at the meetings? What sort of decisions does the Board make? What rules govern its actions? We do not know.

The unavailability of our university's constitution is particularly troubling. Every university has bylaws, a set of rules that govern and constrain its leadership. They determine the structure of the university's administration, delineating the powers and duties of the president,

vice presidents, and board members. They explain how a president is elected and how trustees are appointed. And they govern trustees, demarcating their roles and charging them with specific responsibilities.

But YU's bylaws are tightly classified. Dr. Paul Oestreicher, Executive Director of YU's Office of Communications and Public Affairs, maintains that YU's bylaws are not public documents. The Commentator reached out to various members of the Board and was told that only its Chairman, Moshael Straus, can grant access to the bylaws. Chairman Straus has not returned The Commentator's repeated inquiries and requests for comment. General Counsel Mr. Andrew Lauer refused to speak with The Commentator, let alone provide any information about the bylaws.

This policy of withholding bylaws is highly unusual. Yeshiva University is ranked 66th on the US News and World Report's university rankings. Out of the sixty-five universities ranked higher than us, fifty-nine of them make their bylaws publicly available on the Internet. Of the six that do not, a number of them offer access to the rules through the Secretary of the Board or the Office of the General Counsel. By withholding its governing document from the public eye, YU breaks rank with standard practice for universities of its caliber.

Where is the accountability? Imagine if the US Constitution was known only to federal elected officials. The mind rebels. What use are statutes that constrain a governing body if those rules are known only to the governing body itself?

Moreover, where is the Board? Trustees have little connection to or familiarity with daily life here at YU. The Board's decisions, mysterious as they may be, surely affect life on the ground and should therefore take the current reality into consideration. As much as the Trustees should be visible to us, we should be visible to them.

For the benefit of the YU community, I respectfully make two requests.

First, the Board should make its constitution and bylaws public. Adding a new webpage or even just a PDF link to YU's recently updated website would not require much effort. Second, the Board should develop some sort of face on campus. I understand that Trustees are people with family lives, professional ties, and limited time. They cannot all be constantly available for media consultations, and such an expectation would be unreasonable. But I think it is reasonable to expect the Board as a unit to project a public identity, to show occasional signs of life, to be at least somewhat communicative. There should be a way to contact the Board with questions, compliments, or complaints, whether through its Secretary or its Chairman. And maybe the Chairman should appear for questions at town hall meetings and interact personally with students in that forum. A Board with a thorough understanding of the spirit of the university and its complex personality as shaped by students and staff would be a more effective governing body.

I respect the Board's collective wisdom that results from years of cumulative experience and recognize that I know relatively little about managing universities. Nevertheless, I humbly ask you to examine my argument and consider my requests.

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*The Commentator staff claims students spanning the diverse spectrum of backgrounds and beliefs represented at Yeshiva.*

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**1 Up** Pithy way of indicating interest in participating. Also a tearjerker Pixar movie that everyone should watch if they haven't yet.

**2 Thedatemap.net** Dating is hard... finding the precise geographical location of your future *bashert* shouldn't be. This new website gives you exact coordinates to stalk and track down your soulmate.

**3 On Fleek** This term is ratchet.

**4 Jonathan Karp** For the second year in a row, Mr. Karp most accurately guessed the amount chocolate coins in the OSL's Guess the Gelt game. So, if you're looking for a yummy treat, the bizarrely precise Mr. Karp is your man.

**5 2017** As a prime number separated from the previous prime by 6 digits, our new year (along with 2011) is a "sexy prime." This is a real thing.

**6 Free Pizza Whatsapp Group** The species that brought you the wheel, then the automobile, then the internet, now presents its latest technological wonder: free food, all the time.

**7 Game of Thrones** Rav Aharon Kahn, in his recent *sichas mussar*, accused the show of portraying the three cardinal sins. Hell yeah, it does! It's awesome!!



# 7 UP ⚡ 7 DOWN



**1 Having Your Cake** Can't eat it too.

**2 Hogging Seats on Library 4th Floor** I swear to God, the next time I see a bag sitting at a desk for more than an hour, I'm gonna chuck it off the roof of Belfer.

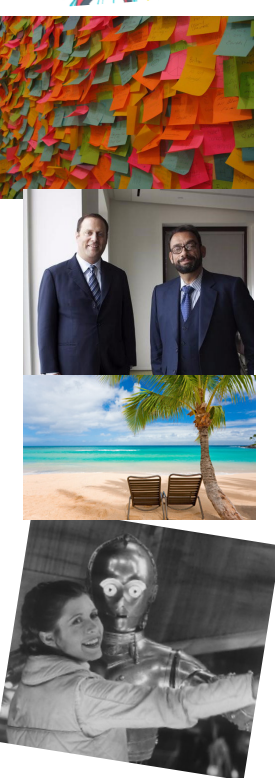
**3 "Slamming Critics"** Not every disagreement is considered "slamming." This term is overused.

**4 Rubin Sticky Notes Wall** Someone in the gym must've really really wanted to remember something.

**5 Platinum Partners Scandal** Listen, guys, we get million-dollar fraud, but *billion*-dollar fraud? You're just making YU look bad.

**6 Friends With No Finals** Those friends who end finals a week before everyone else are the worst. They better run away fast to their warm beaches in Florida, because if I see them I'm gonna chuck them off the roof of Belfer.

**7 Carrie Fisher R.I.P.** "Why, you stuck up, half-witted, scruffy-looking nerfherder!" We'll miss you, Princess Leia.



## Letters to the Editor

To the Editor,

I am dismayed by the discussion of transgender issues in response to Ben Shapiro's talk on the YC campus, and in particular by the language being used. With the term "transgenderism" Shapiro takes up the vocabulary of those who wish to cast doubt on the real, difficult choices faced by those assigned a gender at birth that does not match their own innate sense of who they are. "Transgenderism" is not an ideology, like feminism or socialism, and it is misleading to align oneself on one side or the other of "believing" in it. Using this term rather than talking about transgender people is precisely what makes it easier to cast aspersion on a whole group, by attributing to them some kind of nefarious, values-eroding ideology that does not actually exist.

As far as I can tell, the so-called "debate around transgenderism" taking place here has yet to touch on any facts or lived experiences. As students continue to address this important topic, I hope that they will take the time to understand for themselves what trans identity really means, and what the recent progress around trans issues in this country has meant for those whose lives are at stake. Find out for yourselves what it means to be transgender by reading one of the many memoirs about it, one of the most stunning of which was written by a faculty member in our own institution. (I recommend starting with Jacqueline Rose's recent overview of trans writings in the London Review of Books.) If the question of classification as illness is really of concern to you, find out what the medical community has to say. Before you make any further comments about the trans experience, talk to someone who is trans, or perhaps watch "I Am Cait," and find out why a world-famous, gold-medal winning champion runner would feel that she did not really exist until she accepted her female gender expression.

Rachel Mesch  
Associate Professor of French and English, Yeshiva College

To the Editor,

I'm a proud supporter and former student of YU (and also a graduate of MTA). But YU's new advertising campaign is embarrassing. The campaign (see attached) makes three claims about other universities: Their sports teams play on Shabbat. Many have exams on holidays. And "other schools support BDS on campus." Each of these is more preposterous and embarrassing than its predecessor.

First, does YU really want to be comparing its athletics program to that of other schools that potential YU students often consider, like Rutgers and the University of Maryland? I intend no disrespect to YU's athletics program and its incredible Athletic Director Joe Bednarsh. But if anyone is choosing between such schools based on where they will have more fun as a fan of the home team, this argument isn't favorable to YU.

The second argument is misleading if not outright dishonest. Yes, it is unavoidable at schools with diverse student bodies made up of different religious practices that occasionally a scheduled exam might conflict with someone's religious calendar. But because such conflicts are so routine, they are respected, and rescheduling an exam is completely standard.

But the final claim is the worst. To start with, it is simply false to state that "other schools [institutionally] support BDS." Yes, there are people within such institutions who do. But while BDS is terrible, ideological diversity is not. Is YU really bragging that its student (and faculty?) body is so monolithic that YU students will never have their preconceived notions challenged? Is YU really bragging that it has created a "safe space" that will prevent its students from confronting different opinions and learning how to defend their own? Most YU students arrive on campus from a modern Orthodox yeshiva day school bubble where they've never encountered anyone with differing opinions on the Middle East. This is a problem with our yeshiva day school education. If we wish to create passionate and informed advocates for Israel, we must educate our students to be prepared for the real world. When you leave school you'll be confronted with those who disagree with you. Isn't it the job of a university education to help prepare you to deal with that?

I still will be proud of my children if they choose to enroll at YU one day. But it will have to be despite this terrible ad campaign  
Alexander Chester



## Women's Soccer Team Coach Fired Unexpectedly

By Shoshy Ciment

Gabe Haber, former head coach of the women's soccer team, was terminated from his position earlier this month.

In an email sent to the soccer team players on December 19, Athletics Director Joe Bednarsh unexpectedly informed the team that Mr. Haber was "departing his position as head coach" of the women's soccer program.

Reasons for his termination remain unclear. Many soccer team players are upset by Mr. Haber's departure and frustrated by what they consider faulty communication between administrators and the players.

On December 21, the coach held a meeting with the team, telling them he was sorry to leave and that it was "the hardest thing" he has had to do.

Players on the team recall Haber's final farewell to them as being wrought with emotion and hurt. His three years as coach fostered a close team-coach relationship that will be hard to replace.

Mr. Bednarsh and the team held a parlor meeting on Thursday, December 29. At the meeting, the Athletics director seemed to imply that Haber fell short when it came to recruitment, despite the team's assertion that the expectations for such a task were unrealistic for any coach to achieve, and that Haber might not have been given a fair chance at success.

Mr. Bednarsh said recruitment is one of the most important responsibilities of a coach. Coaches are charged with reaching out to exceptional high school athletes to sell them the idea of playing sports for Yeshiva University, a university that people choose for a gamut of reasons, athletics not usually among them.

The Athletics director was adamant that Mr. Haber was not fired due to the team's poor record during the fall 2016 season. Women's soccer entered

the offseason at 1-14-0.

At the meeting, players brought up the unfavorable circumstances the women's team faces on a daily basis. The women's team had to travel longer to practices than the men's team had to, the women's team didn't always have a trainer present at practices, players did not receive women's-sized uniforms, and busses were not large enough for transporting the whole team.

Mr. Bednarsh responded that this was the first time he was hearing of these problems and that he would do all in his power to fix them.

Athletes on the women's soccer team describe Mr. Haber as "dedicated" and "passionate". They laud his commitment to the betterment of the team and his insistence on equal treatment for the men's and women's soccer teams.

Team member Liorah Rubinstein attributes Haber's attitude with leading the team to its most victorious series of seasons yet.

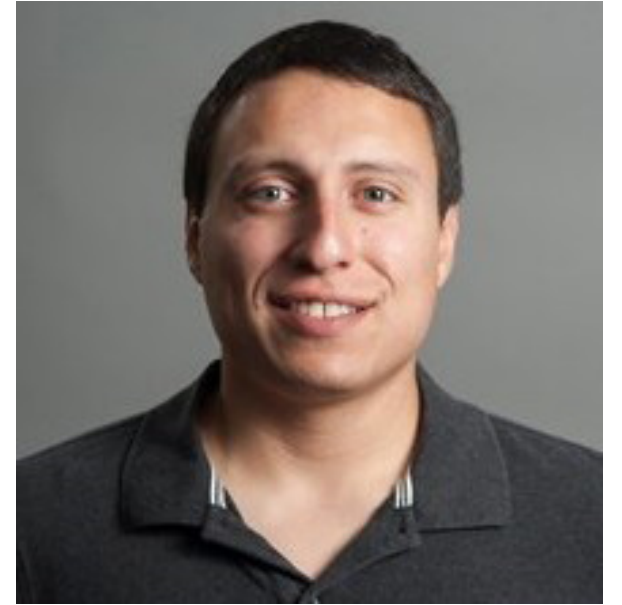
"The team had nearly zero wins until Gabe came. Since he's been here, we've had nine wins. That doesn't just happen. It's the product of a serious and committed coach who knows how to build a team."

Teammate Shoshi Wyszynski echoed this sentiment. She added that according to many of the players, it seems like Haber's firing occurred for "no apparent reason," as he was a perfect coach.

Mr. Bednarsh refused to comment as to why the coach was fired, citing a policy not to address personnel issues. "We are committed to the future and the academic and athletic success of the women's soccer program", he responded. "We are starting a national search for a new coach who will place an emphasis on recruiting talented student-athletes to the program and be committed to the athletic development and personal growth of the student-athletes."

The coach position of the women's soccer team is notoriously ever-changing. Haber's three-year stint at Yeshiva University is lengthy when compared with the coaches who preceded him.

According to the YU Macs website, Mr. Haber came to YU in 2014 after being the assistant coach of the men's soccer team at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan. At the time, Mr. Bednarsh said, "Gabe is going to be a wonderful addition to the program. He brings with him experience on many levels of soccer and will no doubt quickly put his stamp on this team." The Athletics director cited Mr. Haber's experience "developing both technical and tactical training" and thought there was "no doubt that we will see the benefits of that on the pitch."



## Kosher Cart Spices Up Thursday Night Food Options

By Noam Beltran

There are numerous Kosher eateries in the Washington Heights area to satisfy the demand stemming from the Yeshiva University students and community. All are delicious and all are affordable, but not all are unique. However, walking down Amsterdam on a Thursday night, your eyes might fall upon a food cart with bright colors and an enchanting smell emanating from its open window.

The food cart, which is known as Judd's Memphis Kitchen, offers delicious meat options with a southern-style BBQ theme that Yehuda "Judd" Joffre, the cook and owner of the business, fashions himself. Joffre redesigned his friend and business partner's truck and loves having it as the home of his emerging business. "The cart is a great conduit for our food and we are constantly trying to find new locations that make sense to come out to." Joffre, who formerly worked as a real estate broker in NYC, always had a passion for food. Growing up in Memphis, his mother owned and operated the only kosher bakery in town for over a decade and his sisters were both caterers. After catering small events in his community and support from family and friends, this past May, Yehuda set up shop (or cart) in Brooklyn, NY and jumped into the food business. Since then, Joffre and his fellow devoted chefs have been spreading around to many different locations in the city in their cart, including coming to YU's campus on Thursday nights.

One of the things that makes the food experience with Judd's so unique is their emphasis on providing a different type of cuisine. As an observant Jew (Joffre attended Yeshivat Mevaseret Zion for his year in Israel), he is proud to introduce new and exciting selections that the Jewish community can enjoy despite their strict dietary restrictions. Joffre related, "I want to make sure that we can get a quality kosher option to the masses wherever it is lacking." With choices from cholent to "chili con carne" and open eyes towards incorporating new and innovative dishes into their repertoire, Judd's Memphis Kitchen is looking towards the future of Kosher food options.

Pre-dental Junior Yoav Arjhang spoke very highly of experience at Judd's. "I got the "100 dollar burger (actually sold for only \$16)- it was one of the best burgers I've ever had." He also recounted the friendly atmosphere of the workers, noting their sense of humor and care for the customer.

So the next time you're waltzing down Amsterdam Avenue searching for a good place to have dinner on a Thursday night, follow your nose to the silver cart reading "KOSHER" in big red lights, and try it for yourself.

Judd's Memphis Kitchen is under the Rabbinic Supervision of Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Beck of Brooklyn.



## Limited Athletic Center Hours Frustrate Students

By Noam Feifel

Shooting around in the gym with friends is a tough moment to come by these days at the Wilf Campus.

Students at Yeshiva University admit that their college offers them a lot: a religious environment conducive to observing a Jewish lifestyle, a portion of the day allocated towards Judaic studies, a terrific location in Manhattan, great academics, and more. However, many students on the Wilf Campus have noted that one of the things their institution does not offer, much to their dismay, is a workout facility with adequate hours.

The Max Stern Athletic Center, which serves YU students as the fitness facility on the Wilf Campus, is no doubt a busy place. The Furst Gymnasium is the most frequently utilized component of the athletic center, and services many men's sports teams, women's sports teams who travel uptown from the Beren Campus, and even has some high school athletics obligations as well.

In the fall, the gymnasium is used by men's baseball, men's softball, and women's volleyball; in the winter, men's basketball, men's fencing, women's basketball, and MTA boys' basketball use the gym; and men's volleyball, women's volleyball, men's baseball, and men's softball use the facility in the Spring. The gymnasium is also occupied by intramural sports leagues at various times throughout the week.

Beyond just athletic events, the gymnasium is a regular location for hosting social events and other college programs on campus, making the facility's schedule even busier. These events include Chanukahfest and the annual Yeshiva Melave Malka, both which took place in the past couple weeks.

Because the gymnasium is so often reserved and therefore closed off to the rest of YU students during these times, the result is a situation that leaves many of these students dissatisfied.

"What I want is just a gym that is open for me and my friends to come to," said Syms Junior Aaron Szydlo. "I think

SEE ATHLETIC, CONTINUED ON PAGE 8



## CHANUKAHFEST, CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

quenched the thirst of the parched-throated as did the apple cider and other soft drinks available.

Free goodies were also a mainstay of the winter classic. The first 750 students received free swag: a knitted scarf sporting the YU logo and school colors. Students could submit their names on tickets for a drawing that occurred every fifteen minutes. Lottery prizes included an Apple watch, restaurant gift cards, a TV, and the much-anticipated opportunity to pie Yeshiva Student Union President Jacob Herenstein in the face.



Positive reviews emanated from those who attended. Ilan Atri, a first-year student from California, appreciated that “there were a lot of options for fun things to do.”

“I particularly enjoyed playing Xbox and shooting on the mini basketball hoops,” he reflected.

Ariella Yomtobian, a junior studying psychology and business said she came because she needed a study break, and was pleased to find the event “pretty exciting.”

“I loved how they had a donut station where we were able to add our own fillings and toppings,” she said.

Among many of those who attended, the free swag seemed to be a favorite, as it was for Tzivya Beck, a senior studying political science. Jacob Ovadia, a sophomore studying accounting, agreed.

“The Chanukahfest was a great opportunity to celebrate the holiday and be a part of the YU community celebrating of it,” Mr. Ovadia said.

Community building was the main goal of the event, according to Lizzi Peled, president of the Stern College for Women Student Council. “The main goal of the event was to foster community on campus,” Ms. Peled said. “We thought it was important that YU students celebrate Chanukah together at an intercampus event in addition to the campus-specific Chanukah events we run.”

Hudy Rosenberg, president of the Torah Activities Council, the student council overseeing Torah-related activities on the Beren Campus, also saw community as Chanukahfest’s focus. She said that TAC helped plan and execute Chanukahfest even though it was devoid of any explicit Torah content because the value of community is of utmost importance to the council. “A huge goal of TAC this year is to increase the community feel on campus all week long – not just on Shabbat,” she explained. “Events like this are a great way for the entire student body to have the opportunity to come together as one university and one community.”

The event was an all-hands-on-deck effort by the student council officers. According to Mr. Herenstein, the idea for this year’s Chanukahfest, the second annual function of its kind, was conceived at the first meeting the student council members had at the student leaders training in late May 2016, and the details were sorted out by November.

“Every member of the various student councils pitched in to make Chanukahfest a success,” he said.

The seven undergraduate councils divided amongst themselves the specific roles that went into preparing the event. YSU and SCWSC managed the games and prizes;

Sy Syms School of Business Student Councils of both campuses oversaw advertising; Yeshiva College Student Association was responsible for the swag; and it joined TAC and Student Organization of Yeshiva in overseeing food.

“Every member of our team did an excellent job in their designated area,” said Deena Fuchs, president of SSSB-SC. “Seeing that together as one unit, we have the ability to create such an amazing event was definitely the best part of my whole Chanukahfest experience.” The advertising duties her council administered included “Sstuds, YStuds, posters, and all of the competitions on the Facebook event, as well as all posting to the Facebook event and designating others to post as well,” she explained.

Tzvi Levitin, president of YCSA, suggested distributing YU-themed scarves at the event, an idea that was clearly popular among the Chanukahfest-goers. He sought “to keep up with the winter theme established by last year’s student leaders.” He may owe some of his design inspiration to J.K. Rowling: “we talked about making the scarves look collegiate (think: Hogwarts houses) and decided on this design after a bit of back and forth,” he said.

Chanukahfest, which made its debut last year, was a break from the tradition of hosting a concert as the Chanukah time student council event. This year’s Chanukahfest improved on the model from last year, switching from a carnival theme to an arcade theme.

“The concert was good for the extended YU community, but Chanukahfest is something that undergraduates specifically can enjoy,” Mr. Herenstein said. Ms. Peled added that the event organizers wanted students “to meet each other and hang out, which is something they could do at the Chanukahfest but not at the concert.”

Funding for the function came from the budgets of all seven student councils, which are in turn funded by the student activities fee every enrolled student pays. Student council presidents declined to say how much Chanukahfest cost, but Ms. Peled said that the expenditure was comparable to that of last year’s Chanukahfest.

Mr. Herenstein added that this type of event costs less than the concerts used to cost. “It’s about making more for less,” he said.

Despite the event’s high attendance and the overall satisfaction of its attendees, some students were not able to attend. Many were forced to skip out because of school work, including Yael Green, a junior majoring in finance and marketing, and Mendel Harlig, a senior studying economics.

“I had just finished a final and had to finish an essay that was due Wednesday at midnight,” Mr. Harlig said. “Additionally, it wasn’t even Chanukah yet and I there-

## “THE MAIN GOAL OF THE EVENT WAS TO FOSTER COMMUNITY ON CAMPUS” – SCWSC PRESIDENT LIZZI PELED

fore felt no incentive to attend.”

Some students did not attend because they felt uncomfortable with the nature of Chanukahfest. “I only went to get a donut; I try not to go to mixed events that are especially for socializing,” shared Jechiel van Dijk, a sophomore considering the pre-engineering track.

Others could not stay for very long due to time conflicts, but still took advantage of the opportunity to claim their free gear. “Unfortunately, I could not stay longer because I had night seder, but I am glad to have gotten this sweet scarf,” commented Menachum Polack, a junior studying finance.

Jordana Maged, a junior studying psychology, said she could only attend briefly because she had a lot of work that night. She said that despite her short stay, she enjoyed the “great food, cool giveaways, and just a nice time out with friends.”

“You could really see the effort that the councils put into making the event successful,” she reflected.

For Beren Campus students, the time investment of attending was particularly high due to the time it takes to travel between campuses. Residents of Beren have been voicing complaints about the disproportionate number of university-wide events that are held on the men’s campus in Washington Heights.

Ms. Peled explained that Chanukahfest was held uptown because of space and time constraints. “The [Furst] Gym made the most sense as our location to host the event. Wilf has bigger spaces than Beren and there wouldn’t have been enough room on the Beren campus to hold all of our games, food, and hundreds of students,” she said.

“There are more Wilf students who have night Seder than Beren students who had class that night,” Ms. Peled explained. “We wanted to make sure we could include as many students as possible.” The SCWSC president noted that five busses transported women from the Beren to the Wilf Campus for the event.

Looking forward, the student councils will once again join forces toward the end of the spring semester, when they will host the commemorations and celebrations of *Yom HaShoah*, *Yom Hazikaron*, and *Yom Haatzmaut*.







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## YU Student to Participate in Jeopardy! College Championship

By Izzy Feman

We have all heard of *Jeopardy!*. Most of us have ever spent time watching it. But few have ever dreamed of actually playing on the show. This January Netanel Paley, a YU senior majoring in Biology and minoring in Music, will participate in “*Jeopardy!* College Championship” against contenders from colleges across America. The tournament will begin with fifteen participants in the first round, with nine moving

**“I WOULD LIKE THE CHANCE TO SAY SOMETHING ON AIR ABOUT HOW PROUD I AM TO GO TO A JEWISH INSTITUTION AND TO BE ABLE TO STUDY BOTH JUDAIC STUDIES AND GENERAL STUDIES AT THE SAME PLACE AND THE SAME TIME WITHOUT COMPROMISING EITHER ONE.”**  
-NETANEL PALEY

on to the semifinal round and three advancing to the third and final round. The grand prize is \$100,000. As finals wind down here at YU, Netanel will be flown out to Los Angeles to compete against his collegiate adversaries. The tournament will air on television beginning February 13th.

As a kid growing up in Teaneck, New Jersey, Netanel always wanted to be on *Jeopardy!*, the famous game show that he and his family watched consistently. The opportunity for this dream to become a reality presented itself to Netanel when, in a fit of whimsical inspiration (or, perhaps, as a crafty procrastination method), Netanel chanced upon the *Jeopardy!* website and signed up for notifications about any upcoming tryout opportunities. Several weeks later Netanel received an official *Jeopardy!* link directing him to apply for the “*Jeopardy!* College Championship” online test. Netanel took the test in impromptu fashion, on his laptop on the third floor of the library during a study break. *Jeopardy!*'s system of choosing participants, even from amongst those who had high scores on the initial quiz, is randomized. This meant that, to a certain extent, those who were selected to continue

was based upon luck, rather than sheer virtue. But it seemed that luck was on Netanel's side, as a few weeks later he received an invitation to participate in a live tryout.

So, while most of us were preparing for Simchat Torah and the last days of Sukkot, Netanel was busy this past Hoshana Rabbah playing a mock game of *Jeopardy!* in a New York City hotel with two other college students. Despite a rather cocky opponent from “some liberal arts school,” as Netanel recalled, who got off to a fast start, Netanel quickly caught up and performed especially well on the “local names of countries” section (geography is a topic which Netanel grasps uncannily well). There was also a fifty question written quiz and a two minute personal interview, apparently intended to test both the raw knowledge and personality of would-be contestants. It seems Netanel “passed” all of these tests, as he received a call back in early December inviting him to Los Angeles to participate in the esteemed game show.

Netanel is no stranger to high-pressure-game-show-like situations. While most of us were still choosing between high schools, Netanel was winning academic bees left and right, becoming both a state finalist for the National Geographic Geography Bee and a regional finalist for the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 2009. Netanel's interest in trivia contests continued into high school where he participated in his school's College Bowl and Torah Bowl teams. Netanel described how this type of memorizing, unlike cramming for an Organic Chemistry exam, comes naturally to him. “I just seem to have a good memory for remembering random stuff,” offered Netanel, with his trademark modesty, in an exclusive interview with the author of this article. “It's not like my memory is that great for school.”

Yet what makes Netanel's participation in *Jeopardy!*, a nationally televised program, even more exciting for students at YU is his overt religiousness. His large blue-and-white *srugy*, untucked *tzitzit*, and fly-away *payis* not-so-neatly tucked behind his ears would fit well on a Samaritan hilltop or in the most hipster (or Hasidic) section of Williamsburg. But his appearance is recognizable enough to even the typical American, affording Netanel a great opportunity to make a *Kidush Hashem*. Being the first Orthodox Jew on *Jeopardy!* in a few years, Netanel admitted that he feels as though he is representing the YU community and Orthodoxy in general. He described that if he gets a couple of seconds to speak to America on national TV, he would like to spread some Jewish pride by proclaiming loudly his gratitude for having been brought



The author, left, and Mr. Paley during an imagined photoshoot for their imagined new-wave-indie-folk record.

up a religious Jew. “Ideally,” considered Netanel, “I would like the chance to say something on air about how proud I am to go to a Jewish institution and to be able to study both Judaic studies and general studies at the same place and the same time without compromising either one.”

All contestants on the show are required to wear their college sweatshirts, which makes Netanel's representing YU all the more pronounced. This fact was not lost on President Richard Joel, who offered to give Netanel a free sweatshirt in exchange for the good ole' fashioned *yiddishe nachas* (Jewish pride) which YU and the greater Orthodox community will receive from having one of its own in the spotlight.

When asked about what he plans on doing with the \$100,000 prize money if he wins, Netanel responded that “besides for paying for school and stuff like that I would really like to take an expedition to Ecuador and spend a couple weeks birdwatching in a cloud forest over there.” Ecuador is known for having one of the highest variety of birds concentrated in one area, a fact which Netanel, with his passion for biology and all living things, is keenly aware of. As for what exactly a cloud forest is, Netanel promptly explained, with his typical unassuming air, that a cloud forest is “typically a tropical or subtropical forest situated at a high altitude, characterized by a low cloud cover and an abundance of moss.”

Watch out, *Jeopardy!*. It looks like a certain neo-Hasidic cloud forest enthusiast is pretty prepared for this thing!

## Prof. Nissenfeld to Leave Syms after Spring

By Judah Stiefel

At the end of the upcoming 2017 Spring Semester, the students of YU will have to wish goodbye to Professor Steven Nissenfeld. Two of the professor's three children made Aliya over the summer along with five of his seven grandchildren, and he realized that it was time for him to spend more time in Israel.

Prof. Nissenfeld has completed what he considers an extremely rewarding twelve years on faculty at Yeshiva University. He has taught a wide range of classes including, “a variety of management classes, including the introductory course, management in a global environment; human resources; total rewards; contemporary problems in business, which is also known as the Kukin Executive and Entrepreneurial Lecture Series; and introduction to entrepreneurship.”

Prof. Nissenfeld has shown great dedication to the students of YU in both educational and administrative capacities. He was appointed to faculty as Clinical Prof. of Management, asked to serve as founding director of the Executive MBA program from 2010-2013, and asked to serve as Chair of the Management Department for the last two years.

When asked how he looked back upon his time at YU, Prof. Nissenfeld commented, “I can truly say I enjoyed every minute of my teaching (well, almost every minute). It was a privilege to be part of the crown jewel of Modern Orthodoxy, and to contribute in whatever small way I could to the development of future leaders of this most important movement. I have been inspired by the creativity, initiative and curiosity of our students, and it gives me great hope for the future of our Jewish community.”

Of all the experiences and opportunities Prof. Nissenfeld had, he treasures most his opportunity to lecture in the Kukin Executive and Entrepreneurial Lecture Series. It gave Prof. Nissenfeld the opportunity in his words, “to meet and to introduce business leaders and entrepreneurs from all markets and segments to our school and students, and to facilitate the opportunity for our students to speak with, and learn from, true leaders of the business community and Jewish world.”

Prof. Nissenfeld said he came to YU because he was “inspired by President Joel's vision.” After spending almost three decades as a partner in a global management consultancy, the professor felt “[it] seemed like the right thing to do.”

In parting, Prof. Nissenfeld offered his students the advice of a wise man: “stay hungry and stay foolish!” which he explained to mean, “pursue your passion and stay true to your values!”





## YU Hits Refresh on Official Website

By Eitan Lipsky

Visitors to Yeshiva University's official website, [www.yu.edu](http://www.yu.edu), on Tuesday, December 13th likely did a double-take, as a new, made-over version of the site became available to the public. In place of the old site's oft-ridiculed clumsy layout, the new site's homepage welcomes the viewer with an edge-to-edge artful photograph of a YU student, along with a user-friendly display allowing for efficient navigation to the also-redesigned informational pages about everything that YU has to offer. Perhaps more importantly, the site loads almost immediately, which is a big step up from the infamous delay of the previous website. These major stylistic and pragmatic renovations provide an entirely new feel to the university's webpage.

According to Dr. Paul Oestreicher, Executive Director of YU's Office of Communications and Public Affairs (CPA), it had long been known that YU's website needed to be overhauled. The website had last undergone major changes in 2011, a supremely long time in the rapidly changing technological world. According to Dr. Oestreicher, the website had been running in conjunction with a content management system, a program that supports the management of the content of webpages, that did not work well enough to allow for the smooth operation of the website. A few years ago, an effort was initiated to build a new content management system to do this instead. But CPA then changed direction and moved toward the adoption of an open-source content management system, Drupal 8, which is used as the backbone of university sites including Brown, Duke, Penn State, Stanford and Yale. The process of migrating the content of the old website to its new platform began at the end of July of this year, with a goal of being ready in time for 2017, and was completed ahead of schedule and launched in mid-December.

The first issues that were addressed with the restructuring of the website were speed and responsiveness of the site. The old site often took a minimum of 10 seconds to load, and occasionally access to the site was impeded by an inexplicable error message. These were major accessibility issues that needed to be addressed. "The website of an institution is its front door," said Oestreicher. "If it does not invite people in, then an opportunity has been lost." CPA is confident that the new site will be up and easy to access all

the time, and that it will be as fast as any other site on the web. By changing the site to a more operable system, they were also able to optimize the site for all mobile platforms.

Another area of focus for the new website is in terms of the website's general mission. "We thought about the questions of what the website needs to communicate, specifically what YU represents and who we are," said Oestreicher. Whereas the main features of the old website's homepage had an emphasis on telling the viewer what is happening at YU, the new website would invite all of its viewers, such as current students and faculty, prospective students and parents, donors, and mass media members to explore all that the institution has to offer, and to understand the underpinnings of the various elements of YU.

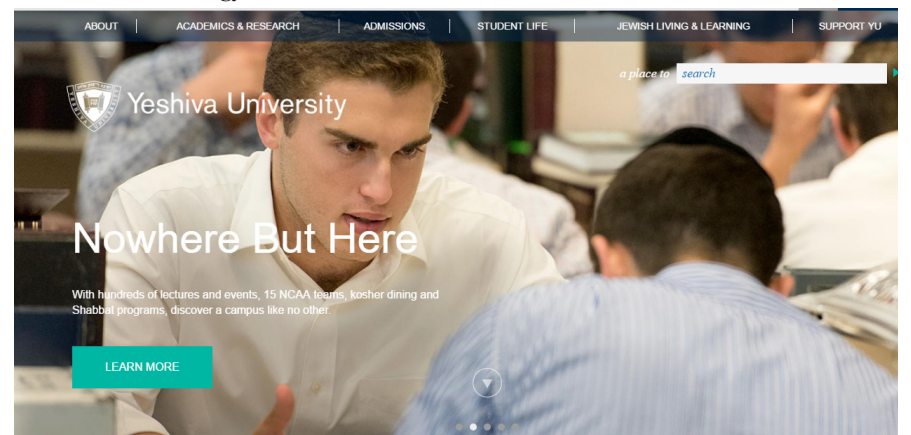
In order to properly convey its message, the CPA went with new, bolder approach for the display of the site, featuring large dramatic imagery. These images appear not just on the site's homepage, but also on most of the subsequent landing pages. The design for these webpages and most of the photography were done in-house by YU employees, and is a true testament to the hard work put in by the CPA team towards the site.

While the design of the website seems a very positive thing, Dr. Oestreicher emphasized that there is much more work to be done with this endeavor. "A big step for YU is to recognize that there are more steps to take," he said. "We don't want to be chasing any fads, but we must make sure that we are making the best use that we can of technology and design." Dr. Oestreicher described the process of renovation of the website as something that will have to come in phases, with the new look and feel of the website as merely "phase one". Future pursuits will include a revamping of much of the content of the website, and ensuring that content is updated on a regular basis. For example, the CPA is currently working closely with the Office of Academic Affairs and the Office of the Provost to update the faculty pages on the website, and to make sure that all of the information there is accurate

and helpful to the viewer. The next phase of improvements will also use feedback about the user experience to improve the ease of navigation and the interactivity of the site.

With all this excitement about the new website, it might be interesting to consider why the site was launched without any official announcement or fanfare. According to Dr. Oestreicher, this was intentional. Like many other digital "product" introductions, trying to identify all the issues in a test environment can only take you so far. Realizing that perfection can't be guaranteed on Day One, launching in a low-key manner is a better way to gain real-world user feedback and begin addressing all glitches or problems. The bottom of the new website links to a feedback form, which can be filled out by users with comments regarding their experience with the new site. Comments received by CPA are prioritized with the aim of addressing issues or minimizing disruptions as quickly as possible; dozens of changes have already been made in the weeks since the site's launch.

With the new look of the website, Dr. Oestreicher feels that YU's website "compares favorably not only to the sites of other universities, but to institutions in other sectors as well" while adding that a few "growing pains" still exist. This "first phase" of improvements to the site will eventually enhance the experience for all types of users, and will hopefully lead the way towards many future advancements in this area.



### ATHLETIC, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

there should be better hours to shoot around at times that are more convenient for students, especially given the lengthy day of both Judaic and secular classes."

Barring any unordinary circumstances during weekdays this fall semester, the gymnasium has been regularly open to YU students from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. on weekdays. Szydlo shared that he finished classes at 5:45 p.m. this semester, making his schedule and that of the facility's open hours largely incompatible. "Starting to play basketball at 10:00 p.m. is really inopportune and usually not worth it," Szydlo concluded.

Joe Bednarsh, Director of Athletics, said, "my job is to try to accommodate all the various needs as best I can. We have many events on campus that have tremendous attendance and the gym is truly the only space to fit them." He explained, "we also make efforts to have the Fitness Center and Pool available for student use most times the basketball courts are taken offline so there are still some outlets for student use."

While the pool and fitness center do offer other options to exercise at YU, students' frustrations extend beyond just the gymnasium. On weekdays, the fitness center is scheduled to open its doors to students at 7:00 a.m. However, many students have arrived at such a time to be met with a locked facility and security guards who can't open it until the student representative overseeing the facility shows up.

The same complaint has been voiced about the pool opening on time. With hours from 8:00 p.m. to midnight on nights excluding Friday and Saturday, the pool already has a limited schedule.

"It has happened multiple times that I got there and it was locked," said told Syms Junior Aaron Goldmeier about both the fitness center and pool. "I already have a rigorous schedule here at YU, and I can't afford to waste time because of student employees who don't show up when they're supposed to."

As the semester winds to a close, students who have voiced their displeasure with any of the various scheduling issues of the athletic center on campus are hoping that their frustrations are heard, and that next semester shows some improvements to the athletic aspect of student life.

## Beren Campus Lights up 34th Street

By Lilly Gelman

The Empire State building wasn't the only thing spreading holiday cheer on 34th Street this year. On Monday, December 26th, the Brookdale Residence Hall of the Beren Campus lit up the night with a window Menorah. Every other year, the Beren Campus Housing office organizes the residents of the building to light up their windows to make a building-sized Menorah – the biggest and brightest in all of Midtown Manhattan.

Utilizing garbage bags to block out the light in some rooms, and red cellophane to create the illusion of fire at the top of the building, Beren Campus students worked together to ensure that at 7:15 PM the candles were burning bright. This endeavour required dorm-wide participation and organizational assistance by the resident advisors.

Goldie Wolfson, the resident advisor of the fourteenth floor -- a junior from Boston -- described the excitement and difficulties involved in "lighting" the Menorah. While the planning, which was set from past years, did not pose a challenge, "making sure all of the students' windows were prepped was a little harder," the junior from the Boston area said. "I felt bad bothering students while they were studying or sleeping, but I think overall people like it a lot and it always looks awesome."

While the Menorah may not have been Halachic, there is no doubt that Yeshiva University participated in a great feat of *Pirsumei Nisa* (publicizing the miracle). The individual Menorahs of the Brookdale residents were visible through the window of the lounge to pedestrians on 34th Street, but the larger-

than-life Menorah from that Monday night spread Hanukkah happiness to the greater Midtown community.

The Menorah was set to last from 7:15 PM to 7:45 PM, a short window easily missed by students busy studying or out for the night. "I think it is a great idea, but I wish it lasted longer," said Adina Cohen, a sophomore from Stamford, Connecticut. "I wasn't in the dorm during the half hour that it was lit, and I was disappointed to have missed the experience."

Nevertheless, the window Menorah seemed to have gone over well with Beren Campus students. Beth Hirschfeld, a true freshman from Trenton, New Jersey, offered her reaction: "I was moderately excited about it, and I wasn't even there!"

Since this unifying Hanukkah expression of creativity only occurs every other year, attempts to change it in the off-years by creating an Israeli flag have been made, but were not successful.





## Tzedek Society Hosts Panel Discussion to Humanize Homelessness

By Judah Stiefel

The YU Tzedek Society, in partnership with the Stern Social Justice Society and the Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Honors Program, hosted a panel discussion on homelessness awareness on Tuesday night, December 13. The panel dealt with the difficult realities of life without shelter, the causes of homelessness, and the government and independent agency responses to combat the unprecedented rate of homelessness in our society. The event's organization was headed by Tzedek Society member Moses Dykman and Yosie Friedman, who moderated the discussion.

The panel featured four diverse speakers, each with different perspectives on the issue of homelessness. First to speak was Mr. Dale Williams, the Executive Director of Midnight Run, an organization devoted to finding common ground between the homeless and the housed, especially through the distribution of essential goods to the homeless poor. Mr. Williams was himself homeless from 1987 until 1990, during which time he benefited from the services of Midnight Run. After Mr. Williams's situation stabilized, he devoted himself to helping those going through the struggles he knew firsthand. He is currently in his seventeenth year serving as executive director of Midnight Run.

Second to present was Mr. Noel Concepción, Department Director of BronxWork's Adult Homeless Services. Mr. Concepción helps individuals deal with both their financial and personal struggles. Specifically, his Living Room team places individuals in public housing, helps them gain access to welfare, and, finally, provides them with a range of services – including medical attention, psychiatric care, and addiction treatment – in order to help them to overcome their often debilitating personal conditions.

The other two panelists are involved in homelessness from research and policy angles. Ms. Giselle Routhier, who spoke third, is the policy director of Coalition for the Homeless. Ms. Routhier lobbies the government to provide affordable and supportive housing. In addition to advocating for policy change. She currently oversees the Coalition's work monitoring and enforcing the right to shelter. The fourth panelist, Dr. Mike Rowan,

is Assistant Professor of Sociology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Dr. Rowan studies a range of New York City-related topics, including crime, policing, and homelessness from a sociological, psychological, and theoretical view point.

Each panelist offered informative remarks. Mr. Williams recounted how he graduated college, but was left without money and support due to a cocaine addiction. When his car broke down in New York City he had nowhere else to go and ended up sleeping on a park bench. He described how he felt lonely and hungry, but the worst part was that he felt dirty and smelled which made interacting with other people difficult. "It's important for people to know that the homeless are just like us," Mr. Williams rejoined.

**"WE WANTED TO TRY TO TURN HOMELESSNESS FROM AN ABSTRACT TOPIC INTO A REAL HUMAN STRUGGLE."**

**- YOSIE FRIEDMAN**

Many of the panelists explained that the main causes of homelessness are mental illness, substance abuse, and growing up in impoverished backgrounds. Dr. Rowan described that the cause of today's homelessness is not similar to that of previous waves. In United States history, homelessness has been caused by the lack of work after the Emancipation Proclamation, the influx of large amounts of veterans from Vietnam who could not work, and massive economic depression. The homelessness nowadays is more disturbing, he offered, because the main cause is the high cost of housing. People working service industry or part-time jobs do not make enough money to put a roof over their heads. The instances of this form of homelessness have increased since the 1980s. Sophomore Avery Ennis said, "I had never realized how large of an issue homelessness was in New York, but after hearing about how such regular people weren't able to afford houses my eyes were opened."

Ms. Routhier described how the government has

retracted aid where they should have increased it. The DeBlasio administration has attempted to provide both shelters for families and individuals struggling as well as rental assistance to help these families more into more permanent situations. Nonetheless, there often are not enough vouchers, and different levels of government do not always follow through on their commitments.

Other services are also very important for the homeless such as soup kitchens, mental health services, social workers, and assistance in job searching. Unfortunately, as Mr. Concepción described, many of those on the streets are not fit to work in jobs due to psychiatric issues or other disabilities. Many others do not want help which is why Mr. Concepción and Bronxworks go out to find those in need and offer services directly to them. They even use GPS technology to keep track of where many homeless like to stay and to follow trends in people's behaviors. He describes how often after a few tries people will finally come in for help.

Yosie Friedman, President of the Tzedek Society, said he hoped first of all to "humanize the issue of homelessness" through the panel. "We wanted to try to turn homelessness from an abstract topic into a real human struggle. This is why we were so insistent on bringing in someone who could talk personally about being homeless." Mr. Friedman hoped that through humazing the issue and "pushing people to think critically about the issue," the panel will start a discussion and, in turn, "inspire people to work on behalf of the homeless, be it through Midnight Run, advocacy, or some other means."

Dr. Gabriel Cwilich, Director of the Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Honors Program, made a political comment at the end of the panel, suggesting that finding affordable housing may grow more difficult for the homeless populations of the United States as the new director of Housing and Urban Development, Ben Carson, takes the philosophy that poverty is a choice that people are able to avoid. It is unclear as to how his philosophy will affect upcoming policy, but it was clear from the panel that now more than ever the homeless populations of New York and the rest of the country need help from wherever they can get.

## \$1 Billion Fraud Indictment for Firm with which YU Reportedly Considered Investing

By David Rubinstein and Doron Levine

Several partners of New York-based hedge fund Platinum Partners were arrested on Monday, December 19 on charges of fraud totalling approximately \$1 billion. Mark (Meir) Nordlicht, the hedge fund's founding partner and chief investment officer, was taken into custody from his home in New Rochelle. Nordlicht graduated from YU in 1990 with a bachelor's in philosophy. He is a member of Young Israel of New Rochelle and sits on the Board of Directors of Westchester Torah Academy.

Among the executives who were arrested and indicted, at least two others are also graduates of Yeshiva University. Uri Landesman, 55, a resident of New Rochelle and former president of Platinum, attended YU in the 1980s. David Levy, a 31-year-old resident of New York City and Platinum's co-chief investment officer, graduated YU in 2006 and took a position with Platinum in June of that year.

In April, Reuters reported that YU considered investing with Platinum Partners. In an article examining Platinum's unusually high returns and risky investment techniques, Reuters noted that Yeshiva University considered investing with Platinum but chose not to, possibly due to concerns about its dangerous strategies. Reuters did not report on YU's specific rationale for not investing with Platinum, but YU investors might have been particularly attuned to warning signs – in the indictment, prosecutors accused Platinum of "operating like a ponzi scheme," raising immediate associations with the notorious Madoff scandal and its effects on



YU's finances. Ahron Herring, YU's Chief Investment Officer, denied that he ever considered investing with Platinum.

The fundraising side of YU's financial arm is currently in transition – Seth Moskowitz, the chief administrator of YU's fundraising office, resigned his position of Vice President of Institutional Advancement on Monday, December 12, the morning after YU's primary fundraising event of the year, the Hanukkah Dinner and Convocation. The now-vacant position will remain empty for the time being, and President Richard Joel will

personally oversee Institutional Advancement until he steps down on July 1.

The Platinum arrests come just days after real estate developer Shalom Lamm was indicted this past Thursday for intent to commit voter fraud. Mr. Lamm graduated with a degree in philosophy from Yeshiva College in 1981 and sat on its Board of Directors. He is the son of former YU President Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm.

*Note: This article has been updated since its initial release*



## Uptown Library Extends Hours During Finals

By Elliot Heller

The night owls of YU will have some extra glee this finals season, as the Wilf campus library will be open all night long for the first time ever, the library announced in an email to students last Monday. All floors of the Pollack library will remain open until 6:00 a.m. from January 1-10, for the duration of finals.

The move was inspired by a Change.org petition started last year by YC junior Yoni Mehrzadi, a biology major who has seen his share of late night study sessions. The initiative was then taken on by the Wilf Student Life Committee, and finally came to fruition this semester.

"As students of YU who face the challenge of a dual curriculum we struggle with finding enough time to bal-

ancing quality of work (not to mention stress levels). The Library's recent improvements show that YU is committed to providing its students with a productive environment in which to study. By extending library hours, not only would it show support for the students that take on rigorous schedules by their own volition, but also allows for every student to take full advantage of the library's facilities."

Explaining the necessity for the move, Mehrzadi stressed that the library serves as a space reserved exclusively for study, and free of distractions, unlike students' dorm rooms, where a roommate might be sleeping, or floor lounges, where students socialize.

For students who prefer to study in the Heights Lounge, it and Nagel Commons will be open 24 hours a day throughout finals, with the exception of shabbat and between 2:00 and 6:00 a.m. Sunday mornings.

Mehrzadi said that while he was satisfied with the change, he would like for the extended hours to be in effect during midterms as well.

"I think after Sukkot break is when the library should start extending the hours, because that's when midterms start to set in, which are as difficult as finals except we have classes too. Maybe three weeks before. Or at least have the library open earlier on Saturday nights, since Shabbat ends so early.

"I'm personally thrilled that they're extending the library hours for finals," said Rachel Lelonek, a junior at Stern College for Women, "because I feel that the library is the place where I get most of my schoolwork and studying done. Even though it's a bit of a commute from Stern to the Heights, it's completely worth it for me."

Lelonek echoed Mehrzadi's wish that the library ex-



tend its hours during midterms as well so that she could "optimize" her studying time. She also had more suggestions for improving the accessibility of the library: "I would like it to be more convenient for me to get to the library during finals, which can be done, for example, by adding more shuttles and making it easier to get between campuses. Even if they extended the library hours down at Stern, that would also be helpful. But I personally prefer the library in Washington Heights.

Others were not as impressed. "I'm not sure how necessary it is," said Yisroel Schatz. The library's been pretty dead this week. I've been there at like 12 and there's no one there."

"The Student Life Committee strives to better the student experience," said Daniel Geller, co-chair of the SLC. "In accordance with our mission, we worked for months with various departments and students to keep the library open later hours this finals season." Geller thanked the Department of Library Services, Facilities, Department of Safety and Security and our student volunteers who committed to helping with this new initiative.

"We encourage students to reach out to us with any ideas they might have to make campus better for all of us," Geller said. "We look forward to new projects that are coming out soon."

**"IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR MISSION, WE WORKED FOR MONTHS WITH VARIOUS DEPARTMENTS AND STUDENTS TO KEEP THE LIBRARY OPEN LATER HOURS THIS FINALS SEASON!"**

– DANIEL GELLER, SLC CO-CHAIR

ance both our classes and our study time," read the petition, which garnered 363 signatures, including some from non-YU students. "Whether it is cramming for that chemistry test the next day, or pounding out a ten-page research paper due that morning, a designated study space is not only desired, but necessary.

The petition argued that "many students, especially those enrolled in YP and taking labs, often end classes as late as 11pm, finding themselves having to skip classes in order to complete assignments and prepare for tests.... the time constraint associated with limited hours is detrimental to student health and productivity ultimately

## A Journey on the Fresh Music Train

By Shimon Lindenblatt

On December 7th, Fresh 102.7, a New York radio station covering "Fresh Music...Better Variety," held their annual holiday concert called "The Fresh Holiday Jam," at The Hammerstein Ballroom. The show featured: Train, James Bay and O.A.R. (Of a Revolution). Over 1500 people packed the venue for the fun and enjoyable night of music.

The Maryland based Alt-Rock band O.A.R. kicked off the show with a set including both new and old material. Their set included their most well known and only Platinum song "Shattered (Turn the Car Around)" off their 2008 album *All Sides*. They also performed their newest hit single "I Go Through."

The Grammy nominated British Indie Rock artist James Bay was the next to take the stage. The crowd rocked out to his two hit original songs "Let It Go" and



"Hold Back the River." James also had an amazing long guitar solo during his cover of Creedence Clearwater Revival's song "Proud Mary." The crowd was fully engaged throughout his entire set.

Train headlined the night with a remarkable 11 song set. The San Francisco based rock group fronted by Patrick Monahan kicked off their set with "Drive By," their 2012 top 10 hit. Train performed all of their big hits from "50 Ways to Say Goodbye," and "Meet Virginia," to "Play That Song," and "Hey, Soul Sister." The entire set was amazing but there were some mo-

ments that stood out among the rest. One of those moments was when Patrick decided to perform the band's hit "Marry Me" without the microphone, just accompanied by an acoustic guitar. The highlight of the night was when the band invited special guest, Matt Nathanson, best known for his song "Come on Get Higher," to perform a cover of Queen's "Under Pressure." Train closed out the amazing night of music with one of their first hits, "Drops of Jupiter."





# Why Can't We All Just Get Along? How Identity Politics Fuels Division in a Time of Great Compromise

By Aryeh Schonbrun

If you haven't been paying much attention lately, America is in crisis. This past election goes to show you that our dual-party system suffers from unprecedented instability (at least since Lincoln's time). While President-elect Trump won the election, he did not win over the hearts and minds of America's public. In fact, he *trails* his runner-up opponent Hillary Clinton by nearly three million votes! I do not mean to question the merits of Donald Trump's victory—he won fair and square—and I also don't quite understand the benefits of dismantling the Electoral College system. However, I do recognize the problems presented by such a hard-fought election. It is most natural for the losing side of any conflict to feel let-down by the results. A sports fan knows full well how much it hurts to see his team lose deep in the playoffs. It does not surprise me that after an election so hotly contested, whose consequences can affect every aspect of local, domestic, and international politics, a Clinton supporter might justifiably feel *very* upset.

Nevertheless, I struggle to understand the underlying reasoning of the Clinton supporter, the rationale for his observed dismay. Usually the ideas behind the parties and candidates correspond to specific political philosophies that compete for the public's approval. This time around, that assumption did not seem to hold true. Instead of demonstrating concise, coherent political stances on a wide range of issues, the candidates resorted to ad-hominem attacks on their opponent's "fitness" or "temperament," smearing the candidate's personality, rather than engaging in political discourse and discussing the issues at hand. I watched the presidential debates, in a sense, not in order to learn about a particular candidate's position on the quite important questions of economy, global politics, and social issues, but in search of late-night entertainment. I cannot deny to you that the personal barbs exchanged indeed interested me much more than any actual discourse on global warming or minimum wage might have. Entertainment aside, this election, more than really any other I have witnessed, seemed to confirm an overwhelming suspicion of mine that American politics has descended into the realm of the absurd and does not much care for the real problems of the voters.

To be more precise, America has, over the past few decades, adopted liberal social stances, while it has forgotten the socialism of the post-war era. In an article for the libertarian think tank *Cato Institute*, Emily Ekins analyzes a recent Gallup poll (2015) and finds, as her title suggests, that "Social Liberalism in the U.S. on the Rise, Fiscal Conservatism Remains Strong." She reports that the polls show that "in 1999 Americans were nearly twice as likely to say they were socially conservative as socially liberal... In Gallup's latest poll, Americans are equally likely to say they are socially liberal as socially conservative." William Saletan, writing for *Slate Magazine* (5/24/2012) points out that in 1996, 68% of Americans opposed gay-marriage, while now over 55% support gay marriage. He also records that birth control has overwhelming support and that more Americans than ever do not consider pre-marital sex immoral. This, of course, points to America's evolving sexual mores, a highly significant change from the past. I should point out that some disagree with this analysis. While I don't dispute the fact that some issues appear to buck the trend, legally speaking America has moved left and I still think that I can fairly conclude that American society on a whole

has become more liberal over the past few decades.

Interestingly, I cannot say the same for the fiscal policies of recent American presidents. President Clinton, a Democrat, made unprecedented cuts to welfare in his second term. According to George J. Church in an article in *TIME* (8/12/1996), Clinton caved into conservative pressures to fulfill his campaign promises to reform welfare and incentivize people to find jobs, amidst a turn to so-called "New Democratic values." "A veto, however, would have repudiated the entire moderate, New Democrat stance—champion of family values, balanced budgets, more cops on the streets—that Clinton had been cultivating so assiduously since the rout of the Democrats in the 1994 elections. And, of course, there was that matter of his 1992 pledge to 'end welfare as we know it.'" Politically savvy, Clinton knew that he could not expand the safety net, let alone veto a bill that would curb such spending. Similarly, Obama did not successfully roll back all the tax-breaks of the Bush (43) era,

of our issue positions or ideologies. We point out that ordinary Americans are, in fact, polarized, but it's in their feelings, not in their issue positions. We've come to dislike our opponents in a way that we've never disliked them at this level before."

This falls in line with my initial reflections on this past election. Even though both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton advocated for basically the same things (free-trade, stronger foreign policy, heightened domestic security, gay rights), they clearly despised each other. Though I can't claim that they held *identical* views (Trump was slightly more pro-business but isolationist, Clinton slightly more progressive but for free-trade), I would say that their differences fall within a standard deviation. I don't blame these issues for the fallout of the election, but rather the phenomenon, now a hot-topic for debate, that Bernie Sanders famously denounced as "identity politics."

I refer to Bernie Sanders' statement that he made a week and a half following the election in which he criticized Hillary Clinton's management of her campaign. He complained that she spread herself too thin by playing the gender, race, LGBT, or poverty card. President Obama agreed, saying in an interview that "micro-targeting particular, discrete groups in a Democratic coalition sometimes will win you elections, but it's not going to win you the broad mandate that you need." Mark Lila, a humanities professor at Columbia University, penned an essay for the *New York Times* wherein he also criticized such a strategy: "Hillary Clinton... tended on the campaign trail to lose that large vision and slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop. This was a strategic mistake. If you are going to mention groups in

America, you had better mention all of them. If you don't, those left out will notice and feel excluded... We need a post-identity liberalism... such a liberalism would concentrate on widening its base by appealing to Americans as Americans and emphasizing the issues that affect a vast majority of them." Mr. Lila, like Bernie Sanders, promotes a global liberalism, one that does not distinguish between races, sexualities, or gender. He suggests that by focusing on beating the White, Christian Americans, the Democrats needlessly disassociated themselves from them, a gamble that probably lost the Democrats the election. To summarize the advice of these repentant liberals: identity in politics can sometimes matter much more than the actual issues that the politicians discuss.

Werner Sombart, a German socialist sociologist from the early twentieth century wrote one of the first analyses of the problem of socialism in America. In his relevant book, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (1906), he deals with the paradox (at least for a Marxian) of American politics: "If ... modern socialism follows as a necessary reaction to capitalism, the country with the most advanced capitalist development, namely the United States, would at the same time be the one providing the classic case of socialism, and its working class would be supporters of the most radical of socialist movements." But, with knowledge of history, we can say that socialism has had a hard time taking hold in America. In a book titled *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (2000), authors Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks reiterate our initial difficulty: "The conundrum remains. Although the United States is the most productive industrialized nation, it has never had a viable left-wing work-

SEE IDENTITY, CONTINUED  
ON PAGE 12



**"BY EMPHASIZING INDIVIDUALISM AND THRIFT, HENCE INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES AND LIBERAL MORAL ATTITUDES, POLITICIANS HAVE DRIVEN THE DEBATE AWAY FROM THE TRULY FRIGHTENING REALIZATION THAT AMERICA REMAINS A DEEPLY DIVIDED COUNTRY."**

and while Obamacare has made it easier for many to buy health insurance, a lot of funding for it still comes from the middle-class paying higher premiums for less coverage (high deductibles). During his presidency, the measure of income inequality continued to rise.

That leaves us, then, with a curious dilemma: If Americans, and our recent presidents, have become increasingly liberal and less socialist, what determines anyone's party affiliation, or association with a particular candidate? In an interview on NPR (11/2015), Danielle Kurtzleben hosted Marc Hetherington, an author of the book *Why Washington Won't Work*, and discussed this question. Introducing the topic, Kurtzleben said, "Given all that, it may surprise you to hear that Americans aren't actually all that ideologically polarized. In fact, they're really pretty moderate." Hetherington summarizes: "People are not so polarized on issues specifically or in terms of their ideological predispositions... But that doesn't mean that we're not polarized. It just means that we're not polarized in terms



## The Importance of the Annual Fund

By Ilan Atri

Many Yeshiva University students have never heard of our university's Annual Fund. What is the Annual Fund, you might ask? The Annual Fund is the budget that is responsible for part of the funding for scholarships that are granted to over eighty-five percent of undergraduate students. The Annual Fund also provides both campuses with programs (such as clubs), shuttles, security guards, sports, and other extra-curricular activities. Educating a student costs roughly twice the average tuition, so the Annual Fund helps compensate these monetary needs as well. What many people do not know, though, is where the money comes from.

So how does the Annual Fund do it? One word: Donors. Our generous alumni and supporters are the ones responsible for almost all of the funding. Whether attained through the online resource ([yu.edu/support](http://yu.edu/support)), or directly through one of the staffers in charge of fundraising, the money is always directed toward the pride and joy of the university, the students. In fiscal year 2016, the Annual fund raised \$7.7 million in cash which came from 4,559 donors. More than 3,000 of those gifts were under \$250, which shows that YU is supported on the broader level by the community and does not just rely on big donations. Essentially, the Annual Fund represents unrestricted giving to the

university.

Now that we know the "who" and the "how" of the Annual Fund, we still need to know the "why." As a student employed by the university to solicit money over the phone from alumni, I have heard firsthand why donors give, and why they sometimes do not give. I sit in an office on the 5th floor of Furst Hall and hope that the donor cards that are handed to me turn into donations. Doing so, I have learned that many of our donors recognize YU as the center for Modern Orthodoxy in the world and deem it responsible for shaping the young minds that will become the future of the Jewish people, both of which would not be possible without money. Also, donating is a way for an alumnus



who is comfortable financially, or even not so comfortable financially, to thank YU for the tools they received while learning here, tools that they implement into their daily work.

The university has an entire department dedicated to fundraising the money necessary to support the Annual Fund. Five offices and five cubicles are occupied and busy from nine to five every day by employees who work at fundraising money. At night, from six-thirty to nine-thirty on select Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, up to nine students make donation-seeking phone calls. It is clear from all of these institutions that YU, just like our donors, recognizes the importance and necessity of money influx, outside of tuition, in running this institution.

Why am I telling you all of this? Yeshiva University is often regarded as a business. Curiously, the university is a non-profit organization. Also, a business that pleads its supporters to help it with a donation is unheard of. The university requires large sums of money to stay afloat, and all of it is given back to the students. So be sure to appreciate the team that makes this possible.

Lastly, now that you know what the Annual Fund is and the importance of it, be sure to be around and help out when our university reaches out to you for help, whether now as its current students, or later on as alumni.

### IDENTITY, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

ing-class party. Its trade unions, which have been weaker than those of most other industrial countries, have been steadily declining in membership since the mid-fifties. At the present time, less than one-sixth, under 14 percent, of the employed labor force belongs to unions. This is down from one-third in 1955 and is a level of organization lower than that of almost all other developed economies." They continue, "The inability of American Socialists to create a durable Labor or Socialist Party is not a historical quirk of a bygone era. On the contrary, it is a powerful influence on the present." In a review of the book for the NY Times (9/2000), David Glenn clarifies it again: "Had they [American socialists] managed to forge such a party -- or to capture the Democratic Party as successfully as the Goldwater and Reagan movements captured the Republican -- the United States would almost certainly not be the only advanced democracy with no system of universal health insurance and no system of universal child support. We might not have levels of income inequality and relative poverty that are almost triple those of other rich nations." Glenn writes that Sombart tries to explain the phenomenon by changing our perception of the American worker. He quotes Sombart: "America is a freer and more egalitarian society than Europe. In his relationship to other people and to social institutions, and in his position in and to society... the American is also better-off than he would be in the contrasting European situation. For him 'Liberty' and 'Equality'... are not empty ideas and vague dreams, as they are for the European working class... [In America] there is not the stigma of being the class apart that almost all European workers have about them... The bowing and scraping before the "upper classes," which produces such an unpleasant impression in Europe, is completely unknown." Glenn explains "whereas European laborers still chafed against vestigial feudal attitudes, the American worker 'carries his head high, walks with a lissome stride and is as open and cheerful in his expression as any member of the middle class.' For white workers at least, much of the visceral class-consciousness that fueled European movements was absent." That, coupled with Americans' aversion to relying on the government for support (a result of a highly individualistic mentality) and the socialists' inability to unite, have contributed to the challenges of the socialist movement in America.

But, as both the authors of *It Didn't Happen Here* and their reviewer understood, the dynamics of immigration hampered the development of socialism. In the book, Lipset and Marks make the assertion that immigration made unionizing extremely difficult, as many immigrants took low-paying jobs and did not express much interest in

collective bargaining. Friedrich Engels, co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, wrote that "your great obstacle in America, it seems to me, lies in the exceptional position of the native workers... [T]he ordinary badly paid occupations [are left] to the immigrants, of whom only a small section enter the aristocratic trade unions." Glenn writes that "even though American socialist movements have been disproportionately immigrant-led, immigration has not, on the whole, been helpful to the cause. America's ethnic, neighborhood and religious enclaves ("mutually isolated by their various starting-points," as Friedrich Engels lamented in 1887) have rarely come together in effective class-based political action. Our few successful municipal socialist movements arose in cities with an overwhelmingly dominant ethnic group: Pennsylvania Dutch in Reading, Germans in Milwaukee, Jews on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The problem was not simply ethnic insularity but sometimes outright bigotry."

Writing for the *Mid-American Review of Sociology* (1981), Patrick Akard of the University of Kansas similarly criticized Sombart's ignorance of the same problem: "The most important error, given the problem he set out to solve, lay in his depiction of the working class as if it were homogeneous. He completely neglected the crucial heritage of immigration and slavery in America, and the effects of racial and ethnic divisions on working class unity."

These sources clearly demonstrate that racial and ethnic division represented a big obstacle to the collectivization of American workers. Today's term "identity politics" does not introduce anything new to the debate, it just reminds us that such identity-based divisions present great challenges when trying to create lasting social change.

Regarding the recent political trends that I highlighted earlier, it appears that they reflect a collective interest of the American populace to avoid social conflict. Upon recognizing the immense difficulties brought on by the diverse character of America's population, politicians skirt the issue, adeptly avoiding the tense topic. By emphasizing individualism and thrift, hence individual liberties and liberal moral attitudes, they have driven the debate away from the truly frightening realization that America remains a deeply divided country.

Simply put, if a socialist asks a wealthy capitalist to invest in his less-fortunate brothers, it necessarily creates an atmosphere where people begin to question their ethnic, religious, and racial identities. We Jews are commanded to adhere to strict social precepts: We are prohibited from lending at interest, must leave excess crops for the poor, and the Torah demands a redistribution of sorts through the fallow and jubilee years. However, as God repeats numerous times, such commandments do not apply to our treatment of other nations. We owe our brothers

the dignity of social justice, and while many rabbis understand that we must act kindly toward our neighbors, the commandments do not bear the same strength when not dealing with "thy brother." I caution you not to judge this perniciously, it is but a fact of life that we are more generous with our own kindred. Such a calculation provides us with an understanding of why socialism hasn't worked in America. An essential lack of trust bars the government from introducing community-tying measures. If one does not share an identity with his compatriots, why should he fund public projects to their benefit?

Much of the white nationalism that Europe now experiences can also trace itself to these matters. A recent Economist ("League of Nationalists" 11/19/2016) article reported that "In 2010 the Sweden Democrats (SD), a nationalist party, put out a television ad that captured the popular fear that Sweden's generous welfare system might not survive a big influx of poor, fertile Muslim asylum-seekers. An elderly white woman with a Zimmer frame hobbles down a dark corridor towards her pension pot, but is overtaken by a crowd of burqa-clad women with prams, who beat her to the money. At least one channel refused to air it, but it spread online. Polls suggest the SD is now one of Sweden's most popular parties." Parties like the SD now find favor in the eyes of many white Europeans who do not want to bankroll the large population of immigrants that now live in their respective countries.

If we are to solve the problems of inequality, xenophobia, and the like, we must interrogate our national identities and come to mutual understandings regarding what kind of character every individual, group, state, and region represents, and focus on the common bonds that link us together. Only God knows and time will tell what must occur in order to allow each nation to assume a coherent identity, but I wish that such identities would stabilize in the near-future. Without them, I fear that global disorder may fracture and disable large parts of humanity, and if conscientious, peace-loving people do not take up this task, I fear that hateful ideologues may yet take us back to times of war and sorrow.

On a side note, I believe that Israel presents us with a golden opportunity in its relative homogeneity. Although Jews possess great ethnic diversity, we have all united under the shared identity and history of our Judaism. If I should merit to see the advent of true socialism in my days, it would not surprise me if it came first from Jerusalem.

--  
"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Leviticus 19:18)



## Yair Shahak: First Place International Chidon HaTanakh Winner

By Yael Eisenberg

Three of the following four clues (translated freely by the author) are referring to a biblical character:

1. Clean turban (tznif tahor)
2. Cake baked on coals and a jug of water (Ugat retzafim vetzapachat mayim)
3. Wadi Cherith (Nachal Krit)
4. A hairy man with a leather belt tied around his waist (Ish ba'al sear ve'ezor or azur be'motnav)

Can you figure out (a) who the character is, and (b) which of the four hints does not refer to this character? The answer appears at the end of this article.

Did you find this question challenging? You may find it interesting that this question, and many similar ones, were presented to Tanakh experts from across the globe this past week. These individuals were competing in the annual Chidon HaTanakh for Adults, hoping to win the title of Chatan/Kalat HaTanakh.

Chidon HaTanakh has a long, proud history. The contest was initiated in 1958 by [Prime Minister] David Ben Gurion, who hoped to add a spiritual dimension to Israel's 10th anniversary of its independence. This was an Israeli National Chidon for Adults, in which Amos Chacham z"l, who later became a contributor to the Da'at Mikrah series, won first place. The following year, Chacham continued on to the international stage, after which he became first international 'Chatan HaTanakh'. In 1963, the famous International Chidon HaTanakh LeNoar (Bible Contest for Youth) was established, and continues until this day, taking place annually on Yom HaAtzmaut (Israeli Independence Day).

While the Youth Chidon flourished, the Adult Chidon underwent a 30-year hiatus, from 1981-2010. The Adult Chidon was finally reestablished in Chanukah of 2010 by Prime Minister Netanyahu, former Israeli President Yitzhak Navon z"l, and former Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar. Since then, the Adult Chidon has taken place annually on the fifth night of Chanukah - in a two year cycle. The first part [odd years] is a National Israeli Chidon, deciding which two candidates will represent Israel the following [even] year in the International Adult Chidon.

Last Wednesday, December 28, the International Chidon HaTanakh (Bible Contest) for Adults took place in Jerusalem, where 16 finalists from 14 countries including Israel, USA, Ecuador, Austria and Switzerland competed for the coveted title of Chatan/Kalat HaTanakh. The Adult Chidon began traditionally with Education Minister Naftali Bennett lighting the menorah in honor of the fifth night of Chanukah. This year, though, instead of introducing the event in Hebrew as he usually does with some comments on the blend of Chanukah, Israel and Tanakh, Bennett included several remarks in English in anticipation of the imminent speech by United States Secretary of State John Kerry. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, who usually attends the opening of the competition, was absent this year.

The contest resulted in a tie for first place: Yafit Slimon from Israel and Yair Shahak from USA were both crowned as Kalat/Chatan HaTanakh, respectively. Shahak, YC '10, BRGS '10, BSJM '15, has been a full time Instructor of Hebrew in Yeshiva College (2010-2015). His placing first in the USA National Chidon for Adults last summer qualified him for the International competition.

Shahak was raised in Boro Park and was educated in Chareidi institutions until 12th grade. As a boy, he studied Tanakh outside of the school setting. Shahak describes Tanakh as the fusion of his love for languages and music. He won first place in the USA Adult Chidon as soon as he qualified in 2014, but was not among the top eight finalists in that year's International Chidon. He decided to try again, and began preparing almost immediately after the 2014 International Chidon.

Shahak reported that last Wednesday he felt both more relaxed and more nervous than he did his first time competing. His exceptional performance on the preliminary exam this time around created greater expectations. As a cantor and violinist, stage fright was not an issue for Shahak; rather, he said his hope was that "everything goes well and that my brain transfers the correct answer

to my lips at the right time".

In addition to the competition itself, this year's 27 contestants - who arrived from 20 countries worldwide - participated in a 5 day 'prep camp' organized by the Israeli Ministry of Education. The camp included various hikes, tours of Biblical sites, lectures, and Tanakh-related games, all of which helped the international contestants bond over Tanakh and Israel and created meaningful memories for them. Shahak added, "it's wonderful to see so many people from all over the world with strong devotion and love for Tanakh."

**"IT'S WONDERFUL TO SEE SO MANY PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD WITH STRONG DEVOTION AND LOVE FOR TANAKH." - YAIR SHAHAK**



*Yair Shahak, first place winner of 2016 Adult Chidon, second from left*

At the beginning of prep camp, all of the contestants took a written exam in their native language (or in Hebrew) which determined the top 16 contestants who would be competing on stage. Shahak's wife, Yaelle Frohlich, a Stern and Revel alumna who represented Canada, took the written test but did not become a finalist. The 16 finalists entered the competition with the score they had earned on this exam.

On December 28th Shahak arrived on stage with a perfect score of 50 points on the written exam, closely followed by the two Israeli contestants who had scored 49 points each. The first stage of the competition included questions similar to the question posed at the beginning of this article. Contestants were given four hints (three of which pertained to a specific character in Tanakh) and were asked to name the character referenced in the three hints, and to identify the three relevant hints.

Based on their performance, eight contestants (from Israel, USA, Canada, France, South Africa, and Argentina) advanced to the next stage. The points were then reset for the second phase of the competition, wherein the contestants were to answer ten questions in a single minute. In this phase, contestants were paired by countries. Each pair answered the same ten questions, and their scores were compared. The higher scoring contestant of each pair then continued to the next round. While the other American contestant, Nosson Wahl, showed remarkable knowledge and answered nine out of ten questions correctly, Shahak once again earned a perfect score, enabling him to represent the USA in the third stage.

The third stage involved a written test and included four contestants-- from Israel, USA, Canada, and France. Shahak and Slimon (from Israel) both earned perfect scores, resulting in their tying for first place, with the French and Canadian contestants winning second and third place, respectively.

Rabbi Ezra Frazer, a former colleague of Shahak's who won fifth place in the 1995 International Youth Chidon and second place in the 2012 International Adult Chidon, said that "all of Yair's former colleagues in the Hebrew

program are aware of his complete mastery of Tanakh and the drive and focus that he applies to everything he does... I was also aware of the element of luck when you get to the later rounds of a Chidon. The early stages filter out the weaker contestants and leave you with a group of people all of whom know Tanakh well. So when you ask those people a handful of hard questions under pressure, anything can happen. In the International Chidon for Adults, the second round - where contestants must answer 10 questions in 60 seconds - people who know the material cold can still blurt out an incorrect answer as they watch the clock run out. I personally felt very conflicted while watching the competition this year, because I obviously know Yair Shahak well, but Nosson Wahl (who was the other American - along with me - in the 2012 Chidon for Adults) is also my friend. So I was happy to see both of them perform outstandingly well." Rabbi Frazer, who is currently pursuing a PhD in Tanakh at Revel, is a Hebrew Instructor in YU. He organized a Chidon viewing party on campus last Wednesday.

Chani Grossman, a junior at Stern majoring in Judaic studies, attended the Chidon viewing party. "It was amazing to watch so many people who knew so much Tanakh *beal peh* (by heart)," said Grossman, "but also who were so celebrated for it, in a major event on Israeli television. It was also amazing to see a representative of YU winning--both from the usual "hometown pride" feeling and seeing it as an expression of the tremendous amount of Torah and scholarship at YU."

Yeshiva University students and alumni have a long track record of excelling in the International Chidon, and even winning first place (which is extremely unusual for non-Israeli contestants). In 2013, Yishai Eisenberg, then a freshman at MTA and currently a sophomore at Yeshiva College, became the third American to win first place in the history of the International Youth Chidon. The second American to do so, in 1988, was Rabbi Jeremy Wieder, current Rosh Yeshiva in YU and then a freshman in Yeshiva College. Shahak participated in Rabbi Wieder's

shiur during most of his undergraduate/graduate years, which "intensified [his] love for Tanakh from many aspects". One of Shahak's college majors was Bible, and after guest lecturing at many campuses (including Ivy League schools), he claims that "YU's Jewish Studies Department is second to none." He particularly remembers Dr. Shalom Holtz's *Jeremiah* course and Dr. Aaron Koller's *Amos and Hosea* course as pivotal experiences in his method of Tanakh study.

When asked for the key to success in Chidon, Shahak said that he feels it's "...devotion, it really needs to be a labor of love. Start studying Tanakh from a young age, and really connect to it. There are things in Tanakh which will speak to anyone: there are laws, stories, theological debates, different ways to serve God, multifaceted language (and linguistic differences between the different books), poetry, celebrating life, contemplating death--find a core element that speaks to you, turn your study from a 'chore' into a daily routine that you cannot wait to tackle, and above all, remember that, regardless of the outcome in the competition, the real 'victory' here is the study of our core text, the heart and soul of our religion."

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The USA Adult Chidon is sponsored by the World Zionist Organization, and occurs every two years. One must be 24 years old to qualify for the Adult Chidon. For more information about the Adult Chidon, see the general Chidon website: <http://edu.gov.il/noar/BibleContest/adults/Pages/AGG/AGG.aspx>

For more information about the USA Youth Chidon, see: <https://chidonusa.wordpress.com/>

To watch the 2016 International Adult Chidon: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6sxWYpYeoo&t=333s>

Answer to the question at the beginning of this article: the second, third, and fourth hints are referring to Elijah/Eliyahu the Prophet. The first hint: clean turban - tznif tahor - appears in Zecharya 3:5.



# Changes at YU, Charted

By Shlomo Friedman

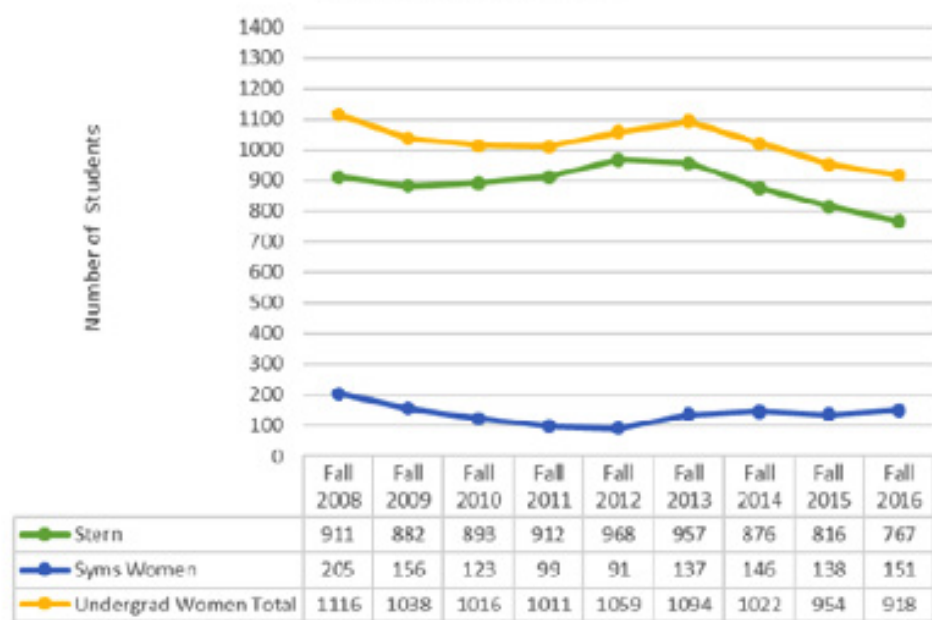
As a fourth year student on campus, I remember the good old days of YU. During this bygone bucolic era, Golan was free on Mondays, Glueck elevator doors opened instantaneously, and the Belfer wind tunnel simply didn't exist. Imagine that, FTOC.

At least, I think that's what I remember; I'm not really sure now. After four years of intense schooling and thumpingly loud street music, it's possible a neuron or two got fried. So how do we look back objectively if memory is not so reliable? How can we figure out what has changed over the years, particularly here at YU?

My preferred lens uses cold, hard, and objective data to analyze change. Rather than anecdotes and ponderous speculation, numbers and data reveal the changes experienced by the three undergraduate schools, Yeshiva College (YC), Stern College for Women (Stern), and Sy Syms School of Business (Syms).

Let's begin our analysis of Yeshiva University by looking at enrollment, stretching back to Fall 2008.

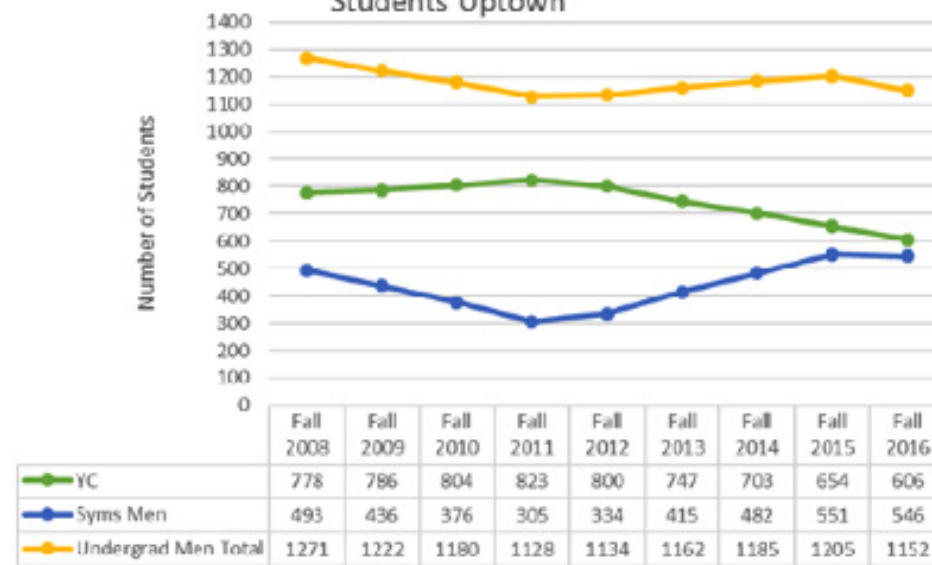
Number of Full and Part Time Undergraduate Students Downtown



Overall, the total male undergraduate population has decreased by 119 students since Fall 2008, though remains relatively consistent since Spring 2011. Since Fall 2011, however, Syms has seen an increase of 240 students, while YC has seen a decrease of over 200 students. This would seem to indicate that YC students are moving toward Syms, as the total undergraduate population remains stable.

The current undergraduate women student population has decreased by approx-

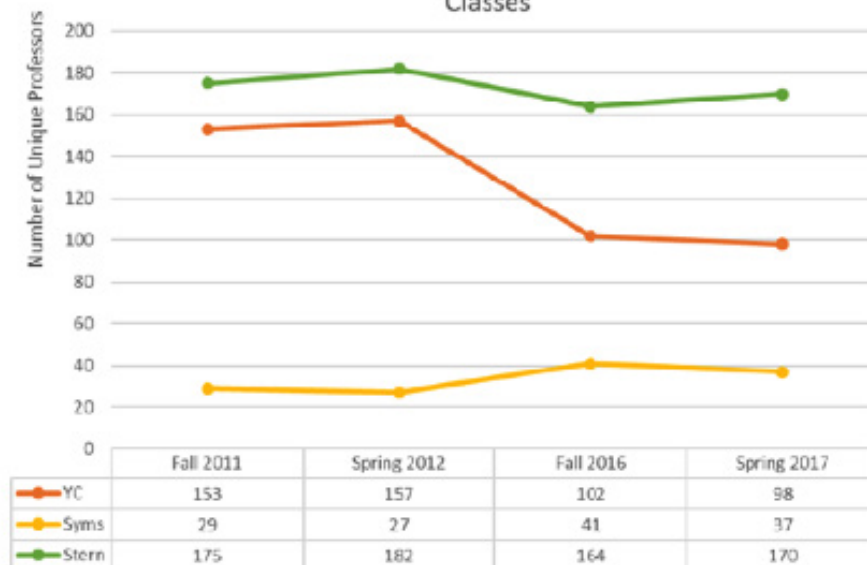
Number of Full and Part Time Undergraduate Students Uptown



imately 200 students from a high of 1116 in Fall 2008. This overall drop is mainly driven by a decrease in students at Stern, as the two lines (Stern and Undergrad Women Total) closely follow each other. Since Fall 2013, the Stern student population has decreased by 176 students, with the business school downtown failing to see the same high levels of growth as the uptown campus, thereby contributing to the overall decline in the current downtown student population.

As such, we've noted trends in enrollment. But are there any changes in the number of professors teaching and courses offered during the last few years?

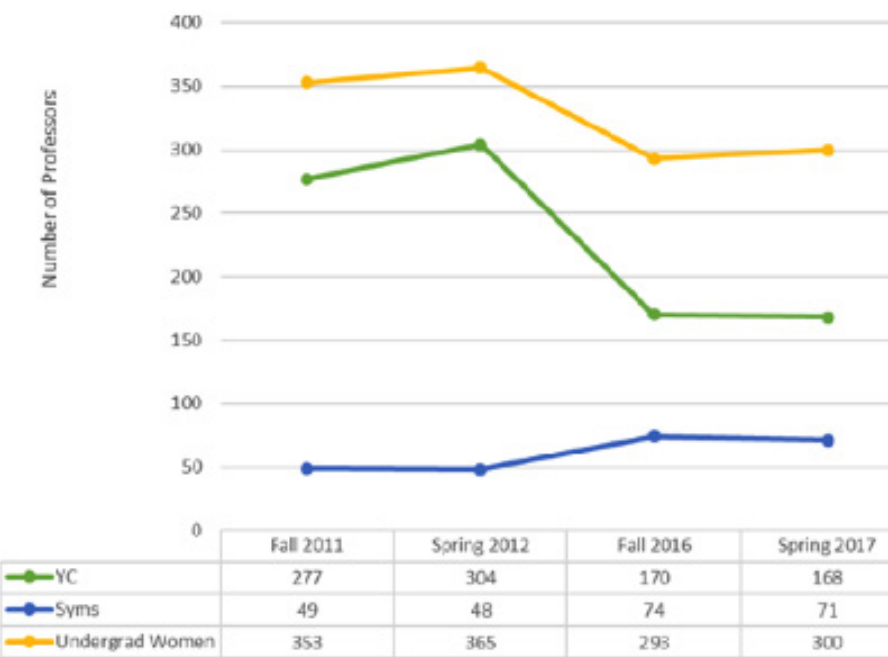
Number of Unique Professors Teaching Undergraduate Classes



uate college. Between Spring 2012 and Spring 2017, the number of YC professors decreased by 59. Stern saw a slight decrease of 12 professors. Syms uptown, on the other hand, saw an increase of 10 professors. Taken together with enrollment trends, YC, with its decrease of 217 students since Fall 2011, also saw a decrease of nearly 60 professors. Syms uptown, on the other hand, with its increase of 241 students, only increased their faculty by 10 professors over that same time period.

Due to the lower number of professors and students in YC, we can similarly anticipate a decrease in the number of classes in YC.

Number of Unique Undergraduate Classes: Excluding Cross-listing



Indeed, from Spring 2012 to Spring 2017, the YC class offerings decreased by 136 classes. Over that same period of time, Stern class offerings only decreased by 65. Syms uptown, on the other hand, increased their offerings by 23 classes. Putting it all together, YC, losing over 200 students, decreased the faculty by nearly 60 professors and 136 classes. Syms uptown, however, even though it experienced a growth of over 241 students, only added 10 professors and 23 classes.

What are the quantifiable effects of these changes? One interesting effect is its impact on average class size.

From Fall 2011 to Fall 2016, both YC and undergraduate women increased their average class size by fewer than two students. Syms uptown, on the other hand, increased the average class size by almost eight students. Therefore, to accommodate the growth in student population, Syms uptown added more chairs to their classrooms, without keeping pace in teacher hiring:

SEE CHARTED, CONTINUED  
ON PAGE 15

The above graph displays the number of professors teaching in each undergrad-



# From the President's Desk: TAC – Past, Present, and Future

By Hudy Rosenberg

My go-to fun fact is that I'm afraid of movies.

When I share this irrational fear at a shabbat meal, people are always shocked. They are often confused and proceed to ask me a series of questions.

What is there to be afraid of in movies?

Are you also scared of TV? (Yes.)

Don't you know it's contained in a small device and not real? (Really? I never knew.)

A movie is a commitment of only few hours that you can just turn off whenever you'd like. But, to me, movies also represent the unknown.

From my experience, many people watch movies to escape from their own lives. Watching a film about the life of someone else serves as escapism, allowing the viewer to focus on the trials and triumphs of another person, rather than their own. It is precisely this phenomenon that leads to my fear.

When I watch a movie, I get caught up in the suspense of someone else's life. I worry about their worries, resent the people they resent, and fear that which they fear. I become nervous and concerned about what will come next – I fear the unknown.

While many people love going to see new movies, I prefer to rewatch ones I have already seen, where there is no unknown, when I can predict when the conflicts are coming and how the characters will change, progress, and resolve those conflicts.

That is not to say that I never see new movies. I will occasionally watch a new movie with friends but rarely is it a spontaneous decision. I prepare to see a new movie more than most people prepare for job interviews. I research the basic plot points and try to gauge how suspenseful it is. I talk to people who have already seen the movie. Often, I have a detailed play-by-play ready while I watch so I can

read what will occur next just before it does. I'm that person.

After watching a new movie that I particularly enjoyed, I feel a sense of accomplishment. Despite the suspense and nerves that are part of the experience, I'm often glad I watched it and look forward to seeing it again.

I've come to realize that the choices I face as TAC (Torah Activities Council) President are similar to choosing whether or not to watch a movie I've already seen or venture out and watch a new one.

TAC, the Beren student council responsible for Judaic student life and programming on campus, can function like a movie rerun. At this point, the university knows all the cues. They know the stage directions and can recite the script by heart. They know what events will happen at each point in the school year and predictable fun will be provided.

Student life can also be like watching a new movie: thrilling and scary. When trying to start new initiatives, we face uncharted territory. We never know where they're going to go. There is no script to follow. Like many improv shows, there is no way to know if the new

## "I REALIZE THAT WHAT IS UNKNOWN FOR STUDENT COUNCIL THIS YEAR BECOMES KNOWN AND PART OF THE SCREENPLAY FOR THE FOLLOWING YEAR."

program will be successful or fail completely. However, with this uncertainty comes the great opportunity to innovate and set the stage for the future.

When making these decisions – whether to create a "rerun" event or write a new script – I try to think about the second time I watch a movie and how enjoyable the process is once I've faced – and conquered – the unknown. I realize that what is unknown for student council this year becomes known and part of the screenplay for the following year.

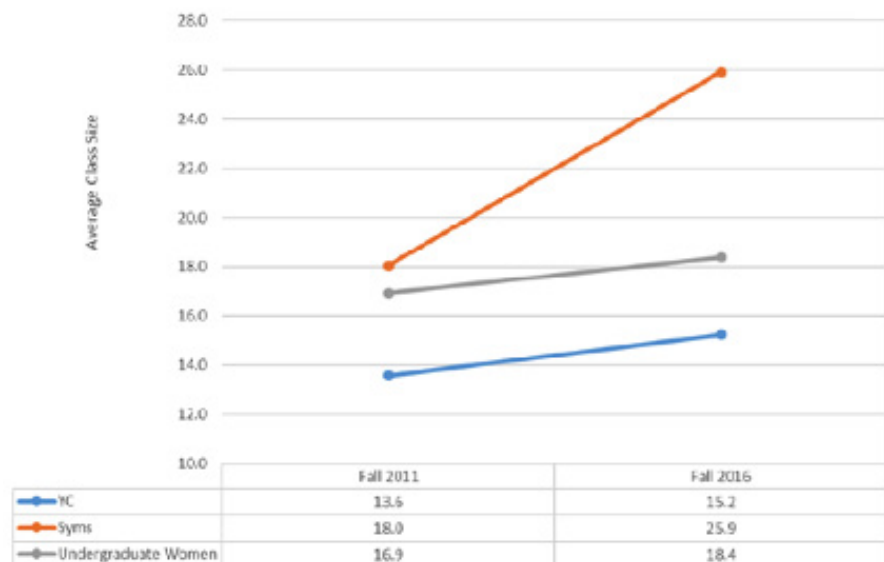
Through my involvement in student council, I'm able to balance these two choices. We often rely on the successes of years past and take cues from their events. At the same time, we strive to conquer the fear of the unknown in order to continue pushing student life at the university to even greater heights.

There is much more at stake when planning an event than there is when watching a movie. While the failures run the risk of being greater, the successes have the potential to be greater as well. As president of TAC I've been venturing out into the unknown in an effort to enhance the student experience on campus, and who knows – maybe by the end of the year, I'll be able to watch more movies.



### CHARTED, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

Average Class Size of Undergraduate Schools



#### So to summarize:

1. Since Fall 2011, YC's student population has decreased by 200, while Syms' has increased by 240.
2. Since Spring 2012, YC has lost 59 professors and 136 courses. Syms has gained 10 professors and 23 classes.
3. Average class size in Syms has increased by eight, while YC's has increased by two.

We now come to the end of the hard data section of this article, which simply pointed out trends. Going forward, we enter into the realm of murky, subjective speculation, where we are left with two questions: First, why this is happening? Second, what does it demonstrate about the university?

As to the first question, why this is happening, I have no idea. People get paid to figure these things out and fix them. There are multiple possible causes for these trends and there is no single way to determine the one cause (if there is such a cause), probably because it's a mixture of various factors, and life is never simple like that.

Take the various decreases in YC. Is the decrease in the number of YC professors influencing the decrease in students? Or is it the other way around, with a declining student population in YC causing the change in the number of professors? Or, more likely, there is a third unquantifiable variable that is influencing both, such as bad press, bad weather, increase in Aliyah, and of course, Madoff.

Furthermore, what's behind the increase in Syms students, as YC's student population fell? Did YC become much more difficult, thereby pushing students to switch to Syms? Or could a resurgent stock market (which mimics the growth of Syms, accounting for a two-year shift) have pulled more YC kids into Syms? Will it continue to drive an increase in Syms students?

As such, it's unclear what is driving these changes and we should be wary of anyone pointing to a single factor. More data may aid this analysis to see what began to change first; again, though, it's never that simple.

As to the second question, what this data demonstrates about the university, two potential, completely opposing, narratives emerge. On the one hand, YC's decrease in professors and courses may epitomize the downward trend of a sinking small liberal arts college. Yet on the other hand, the decrease in professors and courses may simply be a trimming of excess weight that was suffocating the university. After all, average class size only increased by two students. Neither narrative is evidently truer than the other, and as trite and cliché as it sounds, it's simply a matter of perspective.

I invite my fellow students to join the hunt, to explain what in the world is going on here. I only ask that you back it up with the glacial, dispassionate, and austere beauty of data.

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Notes on Methodology:

Enrollment data was provided by the YU Office of Institutional Research.

Data for courses, professors, and average class sizes were taken from MYYU. Any courses and professors teaching those courses that were worth less than but not including two credits were omitted from this analysis. Also omitted were directed study and research on campus credits.

The professor analysis only takes into account the number of professors teaching, not how many courses are being taught.

Because the MYYU course schedule lists Syms classes together with Stern classes on the downtown campus, only the overall trends were analyzed, not particular to each school. I leave it to future journalists with more knowledge of the undergraduate women's course schedule to conduct a more thorough analysis.

The course analysis counted cross-listed courses as one course, not two.

One potential explanation posits that declining enrollment caused the loss in professors. However, the data doesn't support this hypothesis, as YC enrollment remained steady from Spring 2011 to Fall 2012, while the number of YC professors already began to decrease, as shown in a previous article. (<http://yucommentator.org/2015/09/rightsizing-and-downsizing-analyzing-trends-in-yeshiva-college-course-offerings/>)



## 2016 in Movies

By Etai Shuchatowitz

Everybody keeps saying how terrible 2016 was. Just today I flipped through a New York Times retrospective of the year in pictures and it made me realize just how many terribly devastating things happened in this year. Brexit, a divisive election, a worsening crisis in Syria, a refugee crisis with no clear resolution...the list goes on.

But, that feels so reductionist. Years aren't solely bad, or solely good. They're years - filled with good things and bad things. Things that make us laugh and things that make us cry all mixed up in the weird soup that will be bookended in terms of seemingly arbitrary dates dictated by a Christian calendar we've all adopted. And amid the torrent of anger and happiness and jealousy and all those other feelings that every year brings, I find myself retreating back into the only place wherein I feel truly comfortable: movies.

I didn't see as much as I would've liked. Notable omissions from the list of movies I saw include the great looking oscar contender *Moonlight*, the modern western *Hell or High Water* and the cool looking animated movie *Kubo and the Two Strings*. (Just for symmetry some non-notable omissions include *The Angry Birds Movie*, *Batman v. Superman*, *The Angry Birds Movie*, *Warcraft* and did I mention *The Angry Birds Movie*).

As I was going through my list, I noticed a trend. 2016 in movies represented the exact seeming dichotomy that we, as a nation, or perhaps species, are currently undergoing right now. Namely, there is a fight between the cynic/pessimist and the romantic/optimist. My list is basically split in half between movies that are excited about life and its possibilities, and movies that show a dark, depressing reality.

I think this split is exactly where we are. We don't know what's happening or what will happen. Some people are proclaiming a terrible future and that life is a meaningless series of inescapable tragedy, while others are saying that no matter how bad things get, there is still joy to be had and the future looks bright. It's true that things don't always work out in the Hollywood way where our hero, after an hour and a half of travails "finds herself" and wins. She lifts her fist high knowing that she's a better person, we freeze frame and the credits roll. But, it's also true that things don't always end with the main character dying a meaningless death as the music fades out and we see "A Werner Herzog Film" flash across the screen.

I think the main problem with either of these poles is that things don't really end. Movies end because, well because we have lives to live and annoying Facebook posts to write. But, that's a big difference between a Hollywood story and real life. It's not that Hollywood ends things happily and life ends terribly or vice versa. Rather, it's that movies end and life doesn't. It keeps going and going and going until you die.

The other thing I noticed about basically all of these movies is that they're all very emotionally resonant. These movies are not about ideas. They don't espouse some dorm-room philosophy about life and meaning and death. These movies are not meant to be interrogated and beaten for answers about "what they mean". They're just about people trying to navigate their worlds. These movies are meant to be experienced and felt. I think it's an unfortunate trend I find that many people I know watch movies only for their plot and theme and miss the most important thing a movie can offer that other disciplines can't: character. All of these movies are just about people making good and bad choices and living with the consequences.

So, with that in mind, here's my totally unnecessary and unwanted list of favorite movies of the year in order:

**1. Don't Think Twice** - I'm very biased here because I love improv and comedy, and the Upright Citizens' Brigade Theater is my favorite place in New York City. That may be why this was my favorite movie this year. However, I don't think that means that if any of those don't apply to you that this movie is not good. *Don't Think Twice* tells the story of a group of five improv comics in a small improv troupe called The Commune whose group gets shaken up when one of them (Keegan Michael Key) gets a job on a Saturday Night Live-type show. It's a movie all about success and failure and how real each of those pos-

sibilities is for everybody. It's a movie about people trying their best to make it in the world and confront the very real probability that their future will not look anything like they expected it to. It's funny and tragic and so so powerful. It perfectly embodies this fight between the cynic and the romantic as told through the world of improv comedy. There are no good answers - it doesn't spell out whether anybody's right or wrong. All we have is people trying their best to navigate a thoroughly confusing world that they don't know wants them.

**2. Green Room** - I'm of the opinion that horror movies are the worst kind of movies. Not because horror movies are naturally bad. In fact, there are a ton of really great horror movies (*The Ring*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Scream* etc). It's rather that there have been so many terrible horror movies recently that I've become disillusioned with the whole genre (yes, that includes *The Babadook* no matter what anybody else says). Enter *Green Room*, a terrifyingly taut horror-thriller that I can't stop thinking about. The premise is very simple: A band, after witnessing a murder, has to escape from a bar while being hunted down by neo-Nazis. The basic story involves the characters locked up in the green room of the bar trying to figure out how



to get out alive while the leader of the neo-Nazis (a surprisingly great Patrick Stewart) does his best to make sure they don't leave alive. It sounds silly. But, it is so good. It's a movie that says what we're all thinking: we'll try our best to make it out of this, but like it or not, the neo-Nazis are coming for us and will stop at nothing until they've accomplished their goal. Bonus: This one is available for free on Amazon Prime right now.

**3. La La Land** - From the very first moments of this movie, I knew that I would love it. In fact from the first time I heard of this movie I knew I would love it. It's a modern day musical about people trying to fulfill their dreams and falling in love, written and directed by the guy who made *Whiplash* (which was one of the best movies of this decade). As a stupid kid, sitting on the brink of graduation staring at the rest of his life coming at him like a deer in the headlights, I want so badly to not be cynical. I want to be excited and optimistic that everything's going to be great. I love meeting people who love life, if only so I can suck their romantic ideals out of them, hoping it will give me strength. So, here comes this movie which is big and loud and as uncynical as a movie could be and I can't get enough of it...that is, until you realize that the nice songs and colorful dance numbers don't mean that everything ends happily ever after for everybody. This movie is amazing for being both extremely fun and entertaining while never fully plunging into the ignorant romanticism that can be found in most musicals (both modern and old). How it manages this balancing act is beyond me. But it does it. It's scary and sad and happy and fun and all of the things that make movies great and keep me going back for more.

**4. The Nice Guys** - This was the best comedy of 2016. In fact, the only really good comedy I saw this year. It makes me wonder why Ryan Gosling doesn't do more comedy. He's so damn funny in this movie. *The Nice Guys* is a comedy-mystery set among the 70's porn industry. A porn star is killed, blah blah blah, Ryan Gosling and Russell Crowe team up and try and solve it. The mystery is

totally irrelevant. What's relevant is that this movie is super funny and super entertaining. These are the kinds of movies I love - escapist fun with great comedic parts that feel so big that they can only happen on the big screen. I love comedy in a way that I don't love basically any other person or thing. I love to laugh at absurdism and silliness, and I find myself increasingly frustrated that good comedy is so rare these days. But here, in a sea of sequels, reboots and adaptations, sat an original comedy made by a major studio intended to be a summer blockbuster. It made no money, and very few people saw it. But, it was new. It was made by somebody who just had a great original story to tell. And, to quote our creator, it was good. Please see this movie and support major studios taking chances on original ideas.

**5. Weiner** - A documentary about Anthony Weiner, the New York politician who famously tweeted pictures of his crotch, might not sound like the most interesting thing to watch. But, what starts out as a rather typical political behind-the-scenes story becomes a funny and brutal look at the inner workings of politics, politicians and the media. The film follows Weiner on his 2013 mayoral campaign and the filmmakers had access to everything. So, they were there as the media ceaselessly berated Weiner about his scandal, and they were there as Weiner made an idiot of himself by flipping off the press. There are scenes that are laugh out loud funny as we see real politicking at its finest (and worst), and there are cringeworthy moments where he has to evade the woman to whom he sent dirty pictures. But, beyond all of that it's a movie about a lot of things. It's about the death of nuance in our politics. It's about how a media that's supposed to cover news, ends up playing a huge role in making it. And, above all else, it's about a man named Anthony Weiner, oftentimes confused with a character in the news with the same name, who is flawed, noble, funny, angry and, above all else, just trying his best.

**6. Arrival** - Denis Villeneuve is one of the best working directors today. Of the three movies I've seen of his - *Prisoners*, *Sicario* and this - all three feel so purposeful and well crafted.

These are all movies made by somebody who thinks through every detail and makes the exact movie he sets out to make. *Arrival* is no exception. It tells the story of a linguistics professor, played by Amy Adams, who is called upon to help the US military communicate with aliens who have landed on our planet. This movie is flawed and has many plot elements that I don't think work as well as they would've liked. But, that's not the point. The point is a movie that felt big and emotional. It's a movie about the triumph of human reasoning and problem solving. It's a movie about the toll that the unknown plays in our collective psyche, and about how we can look at people and things we don't understand and remain human through it all. It's about the tragically human decisions we make and don't make when confronted with difficulties.

**7. Manchester by the Sea** - I'll admit that even though this movie has been getting buzz like no other this Oscar season, when I first saw *Manchester by the Sea* I didn't love it. I thought it was okay - not nearly as good as everybody else seemed to think it was. But, then I gave it some time and distance and I found myself continuing to return to this movie. I couldn't stop thinking about it. It's a really powerful movie about grief and how to keep going when you don't want to, and see no reason to do so. Casey Affleck is as good as everybody says he is, I'll tread no new ground there. But, Michelle Williams in her scenes - her few short scenes - just absolutely devastates. I refuse to give anything away as the way the tragedy unravels is part of its charm, in a weird way. There's nothing happy about this movie. That's not to say that it's not funny - in fact it's very funny. Rather, every time you think that the characters are going to pull themselves up and "win", you're reminded of the torment that they have to live with every moment of every day of their respective lives. This is not a movie about redemption, or overcoming the odds. Don't read any life lessons into this - it's not your story or my story. It's the story of one specific set of characters who have a history that they have to live with. There's no resolution. No life lessons are learned. Rather, the movie keeps going until, all at once, just like everything, it just stops.



## The Futility of Atheistic Belief: How Freud Proves that God Must Exist

By Aryeh Schonbrun

Today's society presents a challenge for us Modern Orthodox Jews. When encountering the world today, the religious Jew faces the inevitable challenge of standing firm in his belief, loyal to his ancestral tradition, while not unnecessarily ensconcing himself in comfortable ignorance. It was the midst of this conflict that I found myself as an adolescent, and, in many ways, the quest for reliable truths and theological certainty has partly defined my young adult life. However, I am certainly not alone in seeking to reconcile my knowledge with my beliefs. Every proper philosopher has written on such matters, and, I must assume, every human ever to have roamed the earth has, to some degree, contemplated these perennial questions in search of meaning and purpose.

### "INSTEAD OF FIGHTING THE NATURAL DISPOSITION OF MAN TO SEEK OUT GOD, WE SHOULD ACQUIESCE TO TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS NOTIONS, IN RECOGNITION OF OUR FINITENESS AND IN FEAR OF OUR SHORTCOMINGS."

When I embarked on my journey, I did not begin too far from home. Drawing upon the terrific resources afforded me by my privileged upbringing as a religious Jew, I became acquainted with the eternal questions and the traditional responses, as formulated by the great rabbis of antiquity and modernity, and with the depth of the literature on such issues. Though I remain deeply indebted to the wisdom and eloquence of the religious thinkers and theologians who have inspired me, I could not find an adequate, succinct solution to the immense problems that we face today in their works.

It was to my ambivalent surprise, then, that I found an answer in the writings of Dr. Sigmund Freud, the renowned (or notorious) psychologist whose innovative ideas have reshaped our picture of the psyche. It may seem odd that I would find a reason for faith in the works of a professed atheist, but, upon further consideration, it makes some sense. Owing to the popularity of the question of faith, I assume that most conventional avenues of inquiry have been thoroughly explored and, in some cases, depleted. What remains is that which I hope to demonstrate.

Throughout Freud's extensive writings, religion sows up in different forms and is described from different perspectives. In *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907), a psychological work primarily concerned with clinical theory, Freud speaks of adherence to ritual (i.e., a patient suffering from OCD) and muses on the connection of such a neurosis to mass-religious experience. In *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913), he analyzes the underlying taboos present in uncivilized societies and their relationship to modern religious precepts. If one were only to read the references made to religion in these materials, he would most certainly come to an understanding of Freud's personal views on the subject. In both cases, Freud undermines the institution of religion by seeking out psychological sources for the various "rituals" of his patients and the "taboos" of the aborigine peoples brought to his attention by contemporary anthropologists. In comparing the two, he claims that the universal ritual adherence to religion (both savage and modern) constitutes a "universal obsessional neurosis." This language, though, still lacks the clarity of a thorough analysis. That he proceeds to accomplish in his book *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), a work entirely devoted to the study and analysis of the phenomenon of religion and its effects on modern, civilized society.

To start with, I should define for you what Freud meant by "illusion." Merriam Webster's dictionary defines "illusion" as a "perception of something objectively

existing in such a way as to cause misinterpretation of its actual nature," or, alternatively, "something that deceives or misleads intellectually." When Freud uses the word "illusion," though, he does not mean this. Actually, Freud withholds judgement on the truth value of religion: "when I say that these things are all illusions, I must define the meaning of the word. An illusion is not the same thing as an error; nor is it necessarily an error... What is characteristic of illusions is that they are derived from human wishes... In the case of *delusions*, we emphasize as essential their being in contradiction with reality. *Illusions* need not necessarily be false—that is to say, unrealizable or in contradiction to reality... Whether one classifies this belief as an *illusion* or as something analogous to a *delusion* will depend on one's personal attitude." This means a lot for the subsequent understanding of Freud's analysis. While he may have held personal beliefs that did not adhere to traditional religious ideology, he at least felt the need to highlight the fact that he did not know the ultimate truth, and did not set out with the intent to prove religion false (a feat he himself admits to be impossible). He professes objectivity, and upon this impartial basis he presents his enquiry.

When assessing religion's deep psychological underpinnings, Freud begins by accounting for the stresses present in human experience that, in part, create the need for mitigating factors. In religion he sees a source of relief for man, a glade of solace in a tumultuous world. Here's an excerpt from the text that (somewhat repeatedly) demonstrates this point:

"In what does the peculiar value of religious ideas lie?... For the individual,... life is hard to bear, just as it is for mankind in general. The civilization in which he participates imposes some amount of privation on him (*vide* Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930)), and other men bring him a measure of suffering... To this are added the injuries which untamed nature—he calls it Fate—inflicts on him. One might suppose that this condition of things would result in a permanent state of anxious expectation... A man makes the forces of nature not simply into persons with whom he can associate as he would with his equals—that would not do justice to the overpowering impression which those forces make on him—but he gives them the character of a father. He turns them into gods... And thus a store of ideas is created, born from man's need to make his helplessness tolerable and built up from the material memories of the helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race. It can clearly be seen that the possession of these ideas protects him in two directions—against the dangers of nature and Fate, and against the injuries that threaten him from human society itself. Here is the gist of the matter: Life in this world serves a higher purpose; no doubt it is not easy to guess what that purpose is, but it certainly signifies a perfecting of man's nature. It is probably the spiritual part of man, the soul, which in the course of time has so slowly and unwillingly detached itself from the body, that is the object of this elevation and exaltation... In this way all the terrors, the sufferings and the hardships of life are destined to be obliterated... When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. The defense against childish helplessness is what lends its characteristic features to the adult's reaction to the helplessness which he has to acknowledge—a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion." He further reiterates: "they [religious sentiments] are illusions, fulfillments of the

oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind... The benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life... it is an enormous relief to the individual psyche if the conflicts... are removed from it and brought to a solution which is universally accepted."

Though Freud's atheistic bias is clearly present in these reflections, the message itself need not be taken the wrong way. He argues that man needs God; that man, upon seeing the majesty and immensity of creation, feels himself insignificant and vulnerable, and must therefore seek out the One who is in charge. This forms the essence of our relationship with God and can be corroborated by the fact that thrice a day we beseech God for compassion, sustenance, health, and peace, among other things, and thank Him for all the good that He has bestowed upon us.

Additionally, Freud emphasizes the self-evident truth that one cannot merely "use" religion for the purpose of dealing with worldly stresses without possessing true, authentic belief. He denies the benefits of such "Orthopraxy," or, as he calls it, one who performs ritual "As if": "I think the demand made by the 'As if' argument is one that only a philosopher could put forward. A man whose thinking is not influenced by the artifices of philosophy will never be able to accept it; in such a man's view, the admission that something is absurd or contrary to reason leaves no more to be said. It cannot be expected of him that precisely in treating his most important interests he shall forego the guarantees he requires for all his ordinary activities."

To summarize, Freud argues that religion fulfills a psychological need for man. Man, a mortal being, needs the help of the divine in order to reconcile himself with his mundane existence. Such a need, though, can only be fulfilled through an authentic belief; otherwise, man's own reasoning mind, his subversive conscience, will get in the way of any psychological benefit he may derive from religious practice.

SEE ATHEISTIC, CONTINUED ON PAGE 18



"Yes! That's right! The answer is 'Wisconsin'! Another 50 points for God, and . . . uh-oh, looks like Norman, our current champion, hasn't even scored yet."



## A Communication on Communication

By Yair Lichtman

To: IAmAStudentAtYU@mail.yu.edu  
Subject: Your Facebook Response

Dear Stew Dent,

I didn't want to put this on Facebook, because I think that the best discussions happen without the burden of publicity, but I still feel that this would be an important conversation to have. I've been thinking a lot about how you replied to my article. I'm glad that you cared enough about my work to respond to it, but I also feel somewhat disrespected and very confused.

I'm a decent person with a functioning brain, which I'm pretty sure you knew when you read my article (I'm not sure why you'd be interested in reading my writing if you thought otherwise). You're also a decent and rational person, as far as I can tell, and I'd like to conduct a meaningful conversation with you. From the way you write, though, I'm not sure that you want to.

You see, I put a lot of work into that little piece, as I clarified my position, gathered evidence, and organized my thoughts. I also edited it a couple of times, and had a few friends read it to give me constructive criticism before publication. The article was released at noon exactly, and I noticed that your response was posted by early afternoon. I don't know how it is that you read my article, disagreed with it, collected your thoughts, composed a draft, edited it for content and for style, and put it on the internet within those few hours.

I totally understand the instinct to issue responses on Facebook: It's quick and easy, and it's a really good way to get your thoughts out to all of your friends. Plus, conversation happens online at the speed of type, and to stay current is to stay a part of that ever-flowing stream of electronic dialogue. And, to be completely honest, there's something nice about hearing ourselves speak, a feeling

which we can indulge quickly and easily on social media.

At the same time, we've all participated in conversations where we talk around each other, composing our responses instead of contemplating what our partners are saying and engaging in exercises of linguistic gymnastics rather than clashes of dueling ideas. The better performer is rewarded in such discussions instead of the more precise thinker. The internet as a medium rewards this kind of dialogue with "likes" and "comments," but rarely with the greater clarity of thought that real communication is able to achieve.

**"I PUT MY IDEAS OUT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION, AND I EXPECTED THAT SOME MIGHT RETCH WHEN THEY TRIED A BITE. BUT I DIDN'T OPEN MYSELF UP TO HAVE THE SAME VOMIT THROWN BACK IN MY FACE."**

I also want to express discomfort with the adjectives used to describe me and my work. We'd be engaging in a farcical imitation of dialogue if neither of us could call the other's argument wrong. But insulting my intelligence or questioning the sincerity of my motives isn't the same thing. I made a proposal. If you disagree with it, explain why. If you think it would cause great damage, explain why. If you think that it violates some moral principle, explain why. I put my ideas out for public consumption, and I expected that some might retch when they tried a bite. But I didn't open myself up to have the same vomit thrown back in my face.

Gosh, I've really rambled on, huh? I'll try not to go on much longer, but I'd like to share a few thoughts which impact the way I write.

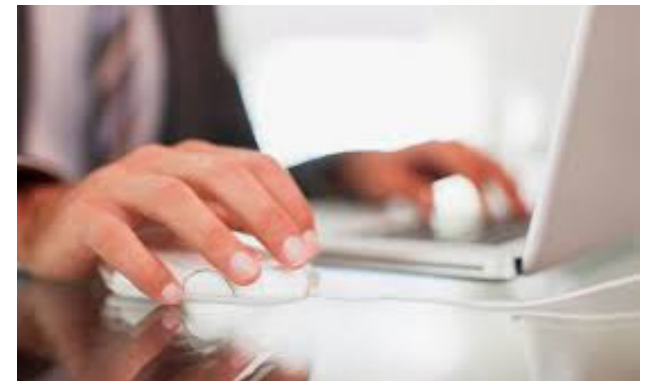
Give yourself some time to develop a response. Worth-

while ideas are like fine wine; they improve with age. Nobody will fault you if your critique comes out a week after my article. In fact, they might appreciate it more if they know you put careful thought into it.

Try to understand the other side. I know that you disagree with me, but let's, just for a second, play devil's advocate. If your life depended on your ability to defend this claim which you find patently false, how would you do so? I don't expect you to change your mind, though my own has been changed by just such an exercise. If you do change your mind, great! I'm glad to know that we agree, and you can use the time it would have taken to write the response in far more productive ways. If not, at least you'll have a better sense of what I really believe. Maybe you'll write a better response for it, or maybe you'll just have succeeded in giving me the benefit of the doubt.

Share your work with a friend for editorial suggestions. We're people, so we're not perfect, but we have a better chance of getting it right if we work together. Your friend might point out an inaccurate or misleading phrase. She might notice an internal contradiction that you glazed over. He can temper your tone if it's overly aggressive or not forceful enough. You'll be a better writer and thinker for it, and it'll show.

Looking forward to hearing your response,  
A. Sudonim



### ATHEISTIC, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

To be sure, Freud is not the first writer to inform us of the psychological necessity of religion. One can argue that *Kohelet* makes a similar claim towards the end of his philosophical work, where, after having explored all possible philosophical approaches to answer his existential doubts, he acknowledges the futility of it all: "Vanity of vanities, says *Kohelet*; all is vanity" (*Ecclesiastes* 12:8). He concludes: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole of man" (12:13). Similarly, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 33b) teaches: "R. Hanina further said: Everything is in the hand of heaven except the fear of heaven." Both passages appear to intimate the natural proclivity of man to believe in God (but not necessarily to fear Him).

We can find similar themes in contemporary psychology and philosophy. In an article titled "A Reason to Believe," published in the *American Psychological Association's Monitor on Psychology* (12/2010), Beth Azar describes man as "predisposed to believe" and asserts that "research also supports the notion that religious thought is in many ways an unavoidable byproduct of the way our minds work." She quotes Scott Atran, PhD, who criticizes the approach of so called "new atheists" like Richard Dawkins who "want to see religion disappear...that will be difficult if not impossible if religion is a byproduct of the way our brains work." However much you try to escape the bonds of religious thought, she contends, the innate human, neuro-cognitive qualities of religion will win out.

In an essay published in *The Atlantic* (12/2014) titled "Why God Will Not Die," Jack Miles writes of his struggle with maintaining an atheistic belief when confronting the vast ignorance of modern science. Although science has made great strides in recent history, it does not offer the benefits of increased existential security. "Scientific progress is like mountain climbing: the higher you climb, the more you know, but the wider the vistas of ignorance that extend on all sides." He quotes from Leszek Kola-

kowski, a "repentant Polish Marxist," whose essay, "The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture" (1973), deals with this problem: "Religion is man's way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith. One can, of course, disperse one's life over the contingencies of every day, but even then it is only a ceaseless and desperate desire to live, and finally a regret that one has not lived. One can accept life, and accept it, at the same time, as a defeat only if one accepts that there is sense beyond that which is inherent in human history—if, in other words, one accepts the order of the sacred." In the end, Miles concludes that one should be a "religious pluralist," open to the concepts of religion, in recognition of the shortcomings of a truly atheistic belief.

Aware of such arguments, Freud tried to fend them off throughout his book. Playing the part of his critic, he asks himself: "On the one hand you admit that men cannot be guided through their own intelligence, [that] they are ruled by their passions and their instinctual demands. But on the other hand you propose to replace the affective [emotional] basis of their obedience to civilization by a rational one[!]" He replies: "They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe...They will be in the same position as a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable." Instead of religious idealism, he proposes following the dictates of reason: "Our god, λόγος [reason], will fulfill whichever of these wishes nature outside us allows."

However, many would argue that such a proposal is bound to fail. By investing reason with the equivalent of divine status, Freud confers omnipotence to those who define reason. Freud himself acknowledges the failings of previous such attempts to create innovation through reason, mentioning the Jacobins of the French Revolution and the (at the time) nascent Soviet Union. He takes these warnings in stride and admits that "should the experiment prove unsatisfactory I am ready to give up the reform and to return to my earlier, purely descriptive judgement."

I would argue that, today, we have gathered enough evidence to disprove Freud's rationale. He bases much of his argument on the belief that science and technology will develop the resources necessary to displace much of the anxieties that plagued humanity. But this illusion of the power of human innovation can never be fulfilled. As much as we progress scientifically, we become more acutely aware of our weaknesses. Though man now lives longer than he ever has, treats illnesses in ways that would have been considered magical just a century ago, and develops technology that increases our collective potential, we remain the same mortal beings of ancient history. A study published in *Nature* (10/5/2016) this fall extinguished the hopes of some who believed in an ever-lengthening life-span. It concluded that humans will most likely not live more than 115 years, even with the expected arrival of more sophisticated technologies, better living environments, and greater happiness. Faced with the inevitability of his ultimate demise, man will surely seek out a higher purpose for his temporal existence in the ancient form of religion.

It seems to me that in this era of accelerated modernization, of technological prowess and perceived growth, we tend to lose sight of the lowly part of our humanity. In the end, we are but animals with a soul—it would be most unnatural to sever ourselves from our worldly restraints. Instead of fighting man's natural disposition to seek out God, we should acquiesce to traditional religious notions, in recognition of our finiteness and in fear of our shortcomings. If our religious zeal does not find a proper outlet, we risk sublimating it, investing our hopes and security in false gods and fallible human institutions (a narcissistic defense). This process drives the misguided forms of nationalism that we have witnessed and the inexplicable blind-faith some maintain in modern institutions such as the democratic process, courts, the free market, and the U.N., regardless of their actual functionality, or inherent value.

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"We are believers, sons of believers, and we have nothing upon which to rely, except on our Father in heaven."



## The YU Republicans, Proudly Pro-(School) Choice

By David Mehl and the Board of the College Republicans

Let's try a little thought experiment.

You have just been chosen to be superintendent of California's public schools. (Your lack of qualifications is not an issue in an age in which Dr. Ben Carson is eligible to be Secretary of HUD.)

You will oversee some 275,000 tenured teachers. Some of them are great; others merely average. A few are terrible – an independent study suggests that between 1 and 3 percent of them (2,750 to 8,250) are 'grossly ineffective,' a step below the thousands who are rated merely 'highly ineffective.'

Here's the question: If the system which you are to oversee is run efficiently, how many of the 275,000 teachers will be fired during a typical year for not being good enough teachers? There's no need to come up with an exact number – a rough estimate or a range will work equally well.

Well, if the number you came up was higher than three – not three hundred or three thousand, just three – then you've already exceeded the number of bad teachers the state actually did fire in a typical year.

It may sound incredible, but from 2001 to 2011, the

state of California removed just 22 tenured teachers for poor performance in the classroom – an average of 2.2 per year.

This appalling statistic – and the many similar ones in districts across the country – is important not only because of the obvious harm caused to children who are fated to endure the worst teachers. It also stands as an indicator of just how difficult public school reform has been.

Since the education reform movement came to life in the 1980s, a wide range of policy solutions have been pro-

**“WITH A SYSTEM AS BROKEN AS THIS, IT MAY BE TIME TO TURN FROM FOCUSING ON REFORMING FROM WITHIN TO EXPANDING THE AVAILABILITY OF ALTERNATIVES FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN.”**

posed for America's public education woes: more funding and more teachers, better curricula and better facilities, increased accountability, longer school days, merit-based pay – the list goes on and on. Yet despite the surfeit of creative ideas and a near-quadrupling of education spending, public schooling has not only failed to appreciably improve – by many measures, it has gotten even worse.

The best explanation for this disheartening situation is the series of perverse incentives for the people who set and implement public education policy. For politicians, the best reforms are the flashy new programs that can be heralded at a packed press conference – or even better, a ribbon-cutting ceremony. For the outside contractors often brought in to implement new policies, the best programs are those that ensure them a steady stream of income from the school system. For the immensely powerful teachers' unions – the two

largest ones combined for more political spending than any other organization in every election cycle since 2008 – the objective is to defend the status quo at nearly any cost to fend off against even the most remote threat to lifetime employment laws or benefits.

The results have been dismal. In New York City, for example, teachers' unions have tenaciously protected a system where more than two-thirds of primary school students are not proficient in reading or math, grade inflation is rampant, merit-based teacher pay is illegal, bad teachers are rarely fired, and the few teachers who have been removed from the classroom are often paid by the city to do nothing every day (even though the city announced with great fanfare the closure of such “rubber rooms” in 2010). All this persists despite years of attempted reform under Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and more than twenty thousand dollars spent per student per year.

With a system as broken as this, it may be time to turn from focusing on reforming from within to expanding the availability of alternatives for parents and children. One such alternative, public charter schools, solve the problem of perverse incentives by placing responsibility for school performance and the authority to run the school in the same place, and linking school funding to school performance. This is the ‘charter’ – the contract which grants school administrators the authority to run a school and the funding necessary to do so, which will be revoked if the school does not meet certain standards. The schools are less subject than their traditional counterparts to the whims of local politicians, and are in most cases free of the teachers' unions' death grip.

Today, more than 2.6 million students attend charter schools (with a million more on charter school waiting lists), and parents of charter school express greater satisfaction with their child's education than do parents of public school students. While charters as a whole only slightly outperform traditional public schools, they do so despite receiving on average 30% less funding per student than traditional public schools. More reform and accountability is needed on this front, but charters remain one of the few bright spots in the otherwise dismal landscape of public education.

*SEE REPUBLICANS, CONTINUED ON PAGE 21*



### BEING A JEW, CONTINUED FROM FRONT PAGE

sher food because without them, the entire community would be at a loss. By default, every member of the community was an involved and committed leader who had taken upon themselves certain responsibilities that benefited the community that we provided for ourselves.

When I began my first semester at YU, I immediately sensed the difference. I do not wish to discount the fact that Yeshiva University is an institution which allows us to be immersed in Judaism throughout our entire university experience – a school that places the value of Torah studies on the same pedestal as that of secular education and provides a Jewish community in which we can thrive. I do believe, however, that it is this fact that we are provided with a community from the outset and not pushed to create one for ourselves that yields a great challenge. The struggle on Yeshiva University campuses is existential as opposed to situational. We are not faced with the challenge of creating a Jewish community, but rather tasked with discovering our own level of involvement and commitment. Will I go to minyan if they don't really need me? Will I give the chabura in the Beit Midrash if there are others willing to do so? There is no pull to be involved in Jewish life on campus, because all life on campus is Jewish life.

I am not writing to make a positive or negative judgment; I am writing to offer an opinion – to describe an observation I have made over the last five and half months that I hope will resonate with at least some of the student body at Yeshiva University. I cannot say which is better; to have responsibility thrust upon a person or to allow those who desire involvement to seek the opportunity out on their own. All I know is that just because we are a religious university, does not signify that religious struggle dissipates within this institution.

Not only does the orthodoxy of the establishment provide a challenge, but the supposed uniformity of the student body does as well. Last year I attended Migdal Oz, an Israeli Midrasha (seminary) with an overseas program, consisting of 39 non-Israelis out of the close to 150 women in the Beit Midrash. Those 39 gap-year students were far from homogeneous; we came from different places and grew up with different religious backgrounds, and yet became a “crew” nonetheless. We bonded over the sole fact that we were the Bnot Chul (women from outside of Israel) in a Midrasha full of Israelis, providing a sense of belonging in a situation where individually we did not belong.

While I still do not have a full picture, it seems to me that the sentiment on secular campuses is quite similar. A bond forms between Jewish students simply because they are the minority – a small group within a large university that creates a community and a connection over what they have in common – Jewish identity. At risk of over-generalizing, I think it is safe to say that almost all YU undergraduate students have some sort of Jewish identity. This supposedly unifying factor becomes what diversifies the Jewish community at Yeshiva University. A student cannot simply identify as “Jewish” or “religious” to feel belonging, but rather is impelled to discover their place on the nuanced and gradational spectrum of religious observance and Jewish identity. We are compelled to identify based on subtle distinctions between our respective Israel schools, our shiur programs, and how we dress. The search and what comes of it, may, in the end, isolate us from other students. Forcing ourselves to fit into boxes and within parameters that can impart belonging, we find that, in reality, those borders do not exist in as clear a form as we have imagined. What is unearthed may be that one does not fully connect with a single group, and while they may not be alone as a Jew at YU, one may be lonely in their

personal religious standing.

I see the religious struggle at Yeshiva University as twofold; navigating the necessary internal push to engage in the community and discovering one's identity within the seemingly homogenous group are two aspects of the challenge of being a Jew at YU. At risk of sounding like an admissions spokesperson, I want to say that these internal conflicts serve as a blessing in disguise. Religious life is not meant to be easy. College students should not sit back and put religious self-examination on the back burner. We should constantly question our standing within the Jewish community and the extent of our involvement. We do not need to worry about keeping kosher or Shabbat, but instead are able to focus on the nuances of how our religious lives appear in all aspects of orthodox practice. Jewish life at YU is far from easy, but it pushes us to question meaningfully the role Judaism plays in our lives – a matter that otherwise may have been overlooked.





## What Is a Mental Illness?

By Benjamin Koslowe

I'd like to briefly, though also hopefully clearly and thoroughly, address a specific but significant issue that has been on my mind since Ben Shapiro's speech at YU a few weeks ago. This matter, which was tangentially referenced in Doron Levine's recent editorial, struck me as obvious at first, but it became clear to me after several conversations that it is far from clear.

Before I lay out my claim, I ask the reader to please consider my arguments carefully. Unfortunately, I anticipate several ways of misreading my article; the best antidote to such miscommunications is, I think, to hear me out fully.

When I heard Ben Shapiro claim that "transgender people are unfortunately suffering from a significant mental illness," it was not immediately obvious to me whether or not he was correct. I say this with full knowledge that Shapiro's position conflicts with popular scientific opinion; debating popular scientific opinion, I think, may sometimes be justifiable. As for this specific case, though, I have no set opinion on whether or not gender dysphoria is a mental illness. I'm not sure whether or not Shapiro was correct, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility.

Levine, in his piece, suggested that the post-speech debate about whether or not Shapiro was mean is a façade for a more substantive ideological disagreement. Unfortunately, my sense from my modest exposure to various conversation forums is that even at the core of the argument (whether or not Shapiro was correct that gender dysphoria is a mental illness), there are two very vocal, diametrically opposed voices talking loudly at each other, and both of these sides are missing the point.

I will try explain how I (and several others I have spoken to and read in print) understand the notion of defining mental illnesses. Let me note at the onset that my thoughts here have nothing to do with issues such as gender reassignment, preferred pronouns for transgender people, etc. I am addressing a very specific term ("mental illness") and the question of what it means. I hope to contribute to thoughtful, respectful dialogue about this idea, and perhaps a change in perspective.



I suppose the obvious place to start is with the modern meaning of "mental illness." The American Psychiatric Association, the largest and one of the most reputable psychiatric organizations in the world, classifies and diagnoses mental illnesses in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a dense manual now in its fifth edition (DSM-V). In "What is a Mental/Psychiatric Disorder? From DSM-IV to DSM-V," published in a journal called *Psychological Medicine* (volume 40 issue 11, November, 2010), several certified psychologists describe the nuances behind defining mental illnesses. After suggesting no fewer than *ten* criteria, they conclude that "the explicit DSM-IV position that mental/psychiatric disorders cannot easily be precisely operationally defined seems basically correct... The situation in psychiatry is reminiscent of some other areas of

medicine, where there are also shifting boundaries between normality and abnormality, with evidence-based changes made over time... Disorders cannot be perfectly defined in necessary and sufficient terms, and there are likely to be particularly robust disagreements about more atypical categories."

This position is similar to those of the National Institute of Mental Health, the American Medical Association, and other preeminent doctoral associations. In other words, a mental illness is not as easily identified as a standard physical illness. Mental illnesses do exist, and the term "mental illness" is something meaningful inasmuch as most people agree about most of its applications. But the psychiatric organizations themselves concede (some more clearly than others, although the truth stands regardless of their admission) that defining mental illnesses is difficult. It is not at all clear-cut.

To get to the point, what is the difference between a mental illness and a physical illness? Only regarding the latter does humankind en masse agree about the axiomatic necessities. Defining features of physical ill-

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**"I AM ADDRESSING A VERY SPECIFIC TERM ("MENTAL ILLNESS") AND THE QUESTION OF WHAT IT MEANS. I HOPE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THOUGHTFUL, RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE ABOUT THIS IDEA, AND PERHAPS A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE."**

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ness include classic symptoms such as: bringing about pain, shortening lifespan, or harming the body. In short, it is the common consent of mankind that these things are *bad*. Given these a priori established requirements, it makes sense that, for definitional purposes, doctors and scientists with relevant knowledge are the people we should look to. A physical illness is something bad (by the common definitions) to the body, and doctors know best whether or not something is bad to the body, so it follows that doctors are who we should trust in the matter of what is a physical illness.

Such is not the case for mental illnesses. While a person's mind may be related to the body (philosophers for centuries have discussed what exactly the mind is, how physical or metaphysical it is), mental reality is not just a matter of neurons and brain states. Consider schizophrenia, depression, autism, and insomnia, all of which are commonly considered mental illnesses. While there are biological phenomena *associated with* these states of being (I address some specific examples later on), they are *fundamentally separate* from the physical. These mental conditions cause certain thoughts and feelings, on the same plane as any other mental state such as introversion or extroversion, friendliness or detachedness, insecurity or confidence. The difference between these mental states and other mental states like schizophrenia, depression, autism, insomnia, and other conditions is that only the latter are determined to be *bad* (to the individual, to society, etc.).

This is where many fall prey to an unwarranted association. Are both physical illnesses and mental illnesses states of being that people think are bad? Yes. Therefore, should they both be defined by the same people? No. Given that mental states are about how people perceive the world, how they act, how they think, and are not primarily about the physical body (although they may have associated physical symptoms), why should professionals such as doctors (even those who are experts in the biological causes of these mental states) have a monopoly on evaluating which mental states are good or bad?

Let's consider some examples to demonstrate this point. Take left-handedness for starters. Different societies have historically viewed this mental inclination for a dominant left hand as something bad. Today, we don't view it as bad. Here's a more complicated state: being

suicidal. To many it may be obvious that suicide is bad, but this matter does not have widespread consent. Euthanasia in the Netherlands is not punishable in certain cases, and the moral sentiment is shifting elsewhere as well (consider Brittany Maynard, a young brain cancer victim who garnered much sympathy in 2014 for her efforts to attain legal assisted suicide, resulting in the End of Life Option Act that took effect a few months ago in California). Given the shift in attitude, I would not be surprised if psychiatric organizations will soon update their positions on people who desire to take their own lives, reevaluating when they are and when they are not mentally ill. Causing a certain amount of badness is a necessary requirement of illness, so as the attitude toward suicide becomes less and less negative (i.e., coming to see suicide as less and less "bad"), the instance of mental illnesses classifications related to suicide intentions will decline accordingly.

One doctor in Israel described to me how he was part of a board of ethicists who had to evaluate a patient's request to surgically remove his arm, simply because the patient had the desire to do so. This board of doctors was split on the issue. Is it bad for a person to remove his arm for no reason, or not? Is he mentally ill? It was not so clear to these doctors, and is not so clear to me. (It is worth noting that my previous two examples – suicide and pointless limb-removal – have the apparent features of causing harm to the body and shortening lifespan. One might argue that, for these reasons, doctors are in fact the ones who ought to determine if these states of being are illnesses. I think, though, that enough people deny the harmfulness in these cases, so suicide and pointless limb-removal are not axiomatically bad. Given this, my examples should stand.)

To invoke a controversial, but relevant, logical extension, it is imaginable that a future society will consider clinical lycanthropy (the delusion of being an animal) to not be a mental illness. Or some other society might consider shyness (an arguably negative character trait) to be a mental illness. While perhaps unlikely and certainly weird, these situations are imaginable. Ethical sentiments change, and definitions of mental illness can change accordingly.

As it happens, the recent DSM-V, released in 2013, determined that gender dysphoria is not a mental illness. But the APA position since its founding in 1952 was otherwise. The ICD (International Classification of Diseases), a major classifier of health disorders, published by the World Health Organization, still uses the term "gender identity disorder," implying something bad about this mental state. Again, though, the positions of psychiatric organizations are not the be-all, nor the end-all, of defining mental illnesses. At the end of the day, it probably makes sense to trust organizations such as the APA for most definitions, especially for conditions that have near-widespread consent as to their badness. This is especially clear regarding mental conditions that are associated with many physical ailments (Generalized Anxiety Disorder, a friend pointed out to me, has been known to bring about physical symptoms), even if they are primarily mental phenomena. But we should realize that these organizations are not the objective arbiters on the matter, and that some of their classifications might be debatable.

By this point I may be guilty of flogging a dead horse, so I'll conclude with the following. I wrote this piece for the main purpose of adding to the discussion space, hopefully in a positive way. I unfortunately expect some acerbic reactions, some gross simplifications, and perhaps even some unwanted applaud, that will result from a misreading. To offer some remedy before the blow, let me address some potential misinterpretations that I anticipate:

- "He called gender dysphoria a mental illness." This is not so. I claimed that defining mental illnesses is complicated. Doctors and scientists are not necessarily the ones who should determine the matter. As for my personal belief, I am undecided on the specific issue of how to classify gender dysphoria, and am unsure who specifically (if anyone) should have the main word on the mat-

SEE MENTAL ILLNESS CONTINUED ON  
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## Why I left YU, and Why I'm Writing About It Now

By Joshua Tranen

I started writing a version of this essay two years ago, during my final semester in Yeshiva College. My final semester, but I wasn't graduating; I had spent the better half of the year filling out college transfer applications and now, as winter turned to spring, acceptance notices began appearing in my email inbox.

That I was leaving Yeshiva College was not a secret. From the first day of the academic year, I told everyone who would listen—friends, professors, my bedroom wall—that I was leaving. When asked, I said my departure was motivated by the College's limited curriculum, which was true: For my senior thesis at Yale, I am writing about two black gay men—Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill—and their artistic responses to the AIDS epidemic, a research project which, despite the presence of brilliant faculty, I could never have pursued at Yeshiva University.

But the truth remains that I also used my academic reason as a cover for my more personal one: I am gay, and I left because I no longer felt safe at Yeshiva University. While at YU, I wasn't out and was terrified of what such a public identity could mean. Each morning, when I awoke, I forced myself to gather the strength required to learn, for yet another day, alongside rabbis that had publicly called gay people an abomination, blamed them for natural disasters, and advocated for conversion therapy—a pseudoscience so dangerous it has been outlawed in many states. I lived in constant fear of being discovered, and in my second semester, my mental health took a turn for the worse; I entered the darkest months of my life, and leaving YU literally became a life-and-death situation.

Driven by fear, I never publicly shared that hidden reason, but I always wanted to; it remained perched, but stuck firmly, on the tip of my tongue. I wanted people to know how alone I felt in my alienation and sadness. I wanted people to know that I wasn't just leaving—I was fleeing. So when I received my first acceptance letter, I decided I would do just that: write one last piece for *The Commentator*—I was an opinions editor at the time—about the hidden motivations of my departure. In my notes, I sketched out a manifesto denouncing the homophobia I saw on campus and in the Orthodox world. I wrote out of anger and rage—the word “polemic” actually appeared in the title of an early version—as well as immense emotional pain. I hoped that if I hurled my words with strength, if I condemned loudly enough, then change would come.

In a decision that I now regret, I informed my roommate, someone with whom I had shared a room for the year, about what I was writing, a decision that required me to come out to him. He was the first person outside of my immediate friend circle and family to know, and the first person, despite the months in which I thought we had grown close, whose response I couldn't predict. I knew, from years of hiding my sexuality, that in the minds of those who don't know better, gayness spreads like a contagion, and I was worried that my roommate could face potential consequences as a result of my disclosure. At the same time, I thought that the two of us were good enough friends that, given the option, he would stand by me and wave away my option to let him leave as ludicrous.

I was wrong.

My roommate moved out on the second day back from Spring break, less than three weeks before the academic year's end. I remember the day vividly: I woke up early, dressed in a suit and tie, and caught a downtown subway

for a college admissions interview. As I arrived in Midtown, entered the Park Avenue office, and rode the elevator up to a corporate office with plush carpeting and dark wooden walls, images of my roommate packing his books and stuffing his suitcases swirled in my head. I tried to restrain my emotions, but at some point during the interview, I lost composure: When asked what I wanted out of my transfer experience, I broke from the script I had prepared; I began crying, and, avoiding eye contact with my interviewer, attempted to calmly explain that my roommate, a person whom I had lived with for almost a year, a person whom I had helped pick out date locations to which he could bring his girlfriend, a person with whom I had gossiped and fought and teased—in short, a person I had come to trust—was, as we spoke, moving out of our shared room because I was gay. In that Park Avenue office, crying to a stranger, the significance of the moment was not lost on me: here I was, trying to escape from one world, and begging, with tears, to gain entrance into one I prayed would be better.

Later that day, when I returned to campus, my roommate was gone. After he left, I lost all motivation to continue working; it was as if someone had knocked the wind out of me and I couldn't catch my breath. I no longer cared about my schoolwork, least of all the piece I wanted to write for *The Commentator*. I made it through the end of the semester solely because I had a set of guardian angels—Dr. Jacobson, Dr. Mesch, Dr. Geyh, Dr. Newton, and Professor Lane, as well as my university-assigned therapist, Josh Altman—cheering me on.

In the year and a half since I have left, I have spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the effect my last few weeks at YU has had on my life. But mostly I have questions for the members of that community, questions which I know will never be answered, or at least not in a way that can bring me comfort. There are many, but they all boil down, at some point or another, to this: How could you treat me so horribly?

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Last month, I, like many at Yeshiva University, was devastated to hear that an auditorium of students cheered as Ben Shapiro publicly humiliated transgender people and boasted about mis-gendering a trans journalist. The week after, I also saw what I expected, which was for the debate about Ben Shapiro and his attack on trans people to be manipulated into a debate about “ideology,” “political correctness,” and free speech.

What was missing, of course, from those discussions was the human element: the flesh and blood and souls of the human beings whose identities were being mercilessly attacked. Questions of trans identity suddenly seemed up for debate like a *sugya* in a Beit Midrash, a sanitized approach which stripped trans people of the respect and dignity they deserve. As someone whose close friend group includes trans individuals, I was horrified at the way my friends' lives became, for the Orthodox Jewish world, both a spectacle for mockery and prop for conservative pontification. Eliminated from most conversations—save for the important faculty letters, as well as some pieces in *The Commentator* and *The Observer*—was what I know to be true: that trans individuals are some of the smartest, most compassionate, and bravest people living on this earth.

Living. I say living because there is a 41 percent chance that a trans person will attempt suicide in their lifetime. I say living because since the presidential election, suicide

attempts by trans youth have skyrocketed. I say living because trans people, especially transgender women of color, face extreme violence and marginalization in their everyday lives. And I say living because living—and living beautiful lives—is exactly what trans people do despite the transphobia—like a room full of Orthodox college students applauding Ben Shapiro—they must navigate daily.

Within several weeks of Ben Shapiro's talk at YU, I decided to pay my own visit to the uptown campus to see several professors who had mentored me while I was in the College. It was my first time entering a YU building since I had left, and I must admit that part of my desire to return was to see what my emotional response to a place so full of dark memories would be.

I can report back that I left YU unscathed. That is, I left without any serious emotional response to the scenes of daily Yeshiva College life that used to give me nightmares at night. If this sounds like a happy proclamation, it isn't. Rather, it's a testament to just how much I've changed, to just how far I needed to run before I felt I could remain alive.

As I left campus—conversations about Ben Shapiro, as well as ambivalence about my lack of emotional response to my visit, colliding in my head—I knew that I needed to return to the essay I had begun two years prior. But this time, I wouldn't write to flame the fires or to tackle the heady issues of Halacha because I now realized that neither of those are what this conversation is really about.

What this conversation is about is the real problem within Orthodox culture of intolerance, judgment, and disrespect for people that are different than the picturesque Orthodox Jew. What this conversation is about is the seeming inability for many within the Orthodox world to treat other human beings with the respect and dignity they deserve; one may even call it honoring the dictum that all human beings are made *B'Tzelem Elokim*.

I decided to return to this essay because as someone who once suffered at the hands of a homophobic culture—and had the privilege to leave—I can't stand by and watch as the same culture turns its hateful eye towards trans folks. I decided to return to this essay because as a young boy in an Orthodox day school, I was taught that Orthodox Jews are supposed to be a moral light in the world, and I want to believe—despite so much evidence to the contrary—that sentiment can still be true.

But mostly, I'm writing because there are real lives at stake, lives which the average reader of *The Commentator* or *The Observer* may not know, but lives that matter and should be treated with the respect they deserve. Lives which are not full of mental illness—as pseudoscience propagator Ben Shapiro wants you to think—but lives full of vitality, tenacity, and beauty. Human lives. And lives which, statistically, will continue to suffer loss if our world does not learn to treat each other with the respect that human life demands.

I'm writing because there are real lives at stake. And that's something I want every person who cheered on Ben Shapiro to know.

*Joshua Tranen is an undergraduate at Yale University.*

### REPUBLICANS, CONTINUED FROM 19

Education vouchers are another promising way to expand school choice. In this system, parents have the option of using some of the money which would have been spent on their child's public education to instead enroll him or her in a private or religious school. Such programs are often targeted to low-income families or students at the worst schools, and because each voucher amounts to less money than is spent per student at the public school level, can lead to increased per-student funding for public schools. These programs allow lower income students the same range of school options as many of their wealthier peers, and their level of education improves as a result.

The issue of education reform is one in which the incoming Trump administration looks particularly promising. The president-elect's choice for Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, is a longtime fighter for school choice who has led fights on behalf of charter schools and school vouchers several times before. If Mr. Trump keeps his promise to direct 20 billion dollars toward school choice programs, his administration might one day be remembered for making available to all Americans, regardless of income level, the ability to choose which school to attend.

On paper, promoting school choice seems to be one agenda around which a desperately divided America can coalesce: more Democrats support charter schools, edu-

cation tax credits, and universal vouchers than oppose them. The influence of the teachers' unions, however, has caused many Democratic leaders to place themselves in opposition to the party rank-and-file, so it may be an uphill battle. Yet whatever the political challenges, giving every child – regardless of income or location – the chance to attend a good school is a goal well worth any effort, and one might even say that it could make American education great again.



## Are Survey Courses Outdated?

By Yisroel Ben-Porat

Every YC student is required to take a survey course, which is a broad introduction to a field of study. The Jewish studies requirements include at least one survey course on classical, medieval, or modern Jewish history. Many majors - such as psychology, sociology, and political science - require at least one introductory course. The history department especially relies upon survey courses, requiring two surveys of European history and at least one survey of ancient or modern historiography (in lieu of a senior thesis). The history department has also offered elective survey courses in American and Middle Eastern history. The prevalence of survey courses in YC compels us to consider their efficacy: are survey courses still useful, or are they fossils of an outdated academic philosophy?

On one hand, survey courses have significant advantages. They provide a broad exposure and background to a field. Oftentimes, a general context is necessary for deeper, more specific analysis; otherwise, it can be difficult or fruitless to engage in a more detailed study of a particular phenomenon. For example, can one understand the Spanish Inquisition divorced from its medieval context? Social psychology without a general knowledge of psychology? The Civil War without a grasp of the broader contours of American history? Such endeavors are of questionable value. Furthermore, without survey courses, students would be ignorant of foundational knowledge in various subjects. One of the goals of a university education is to enable students to become educated, worldly people. According to many, that goal entails a great range of material, from works of literature, philosophy, and history, to other subjects in both the humanities and the sciences. Survey courses can, to a large extent, help fulfill this goal.

Survey courses benefit students in other ways as well. Students who have not decided on their major can take survey courses to find out if they are interested or skilled at a particular subject. For example, Josh Blicher (YC '18) decided to major in political science after taking the introductory course "Fundamentals of Political Science." Even students who have declared a major can discover which aspects of a field particularly interest them, and which electives in that major they'd like to take. For example, David Tribuch (YC '16) told me that taking Prof. Douglas Burgess' course "Survey of U.S. History I" sparked his interest in Burgess' upper-level electives such as "Atlantic World" and "Piracy & The Nation State."

On the other hand, survey courses have several difficulties. Although in theory it is a great idea to study all of medieval Jewish history, psychology, and American history, in practice it is not so feasible. Survey courses rarely cover the full extent of the topic. They don't merely sacrifice quality for quantity, depth for breadth; they fail in their coverage. Is it really possible to substantially engage with the above topics in a single semester? Medieval Jewish history could easily fill two semesters - one for medieval Christendom, and one for the Islamic world. Psychology is an exceedingly vast subject containing

many sub-disciplines, including behavioral, social, experimental, and forensic psychology. As for American history, each century could justifiably deserve its own course.

Besides the vastness of surveyed subjects, there is another difficulty. Some professors lack the broad expertise necessary for teaching a survey course. As renowned physicist John Ziman joked, "A scientist is a person who knows more and more about less and less, until he knows everything about nothing." The same holds true for other disciplines. Although most

**"THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE IS NOT TO RESOLVE OUR CENTRAL QUESTION, BUT MERELY TO ELUCIDATE SOME OF THE KEY ARGUMENTS FOR EACH SIDE, TO POINT OUT AN INCONSISTENCY IN YC'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY, AND TO ADVOCATE THAT THE KEYS TO UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION SHOULD BE PLACED IN THE HANDS OF THOSE WHO ARE BEING EDUCATED: THE STUDENTS."**

doctoral programs usually include at least two years of general coursework, the primary focus is on the dissertation research, which usually involves an extremely specific or obscure topic. For example, NYU's history PhD handbook states, "The department has devised a curriculum and designed requirements intended to move students toward their dissertation as quickly as possible, while also offering grounding in the field before the specialized work of the dissertation begins."

Additionally, survey courses are outdated. In the early 20th century, survey courses rose in popularity as a response to rampant over-specialization. An article from the *Journal of Higher Education* in 1939 refers to the "rapid growth in the number and popularity of survey courses during the past decade," noting that specialists are "often troubled by the extreme departmentalization of learning and... appalling lack of information on matters outside [their] immediate scope of activity." Yet, since then, such courses have fallen in popularity. Countless new disciplines and subfields have emerged, while established bodies of knowledge have lost their prestige.

Although a lack of popularity does not necessarily indicate a lack of pedagogic value, it should be noted that YC's adoption of the Core curriculum reflects a desire to shift away from the survey course mentality. Whereas the old curriculum required two class-

es each from "Literature," "Humanities," and other traditionally-conceived categories, the Core requires "interdisciplinary" courses in categories with titles such as "Cultures over Time," "Interpreting the Creative," and "Contemporary World Cultures." Thus, the ongoing ubiquity of survey courses in YC is puzzling.

The debate about survey courses parallels a similar discussion regarding Torah learning. An age old question is whether broad exposure to Talmudic data (beki'ut) is preferable to in-depth analysis (iyun). Although all agree that both aspects are important, the dispute lies in how to balance the two sides. At YU, the Roshei Yeshiva stand at different points on the spectrum, with shiurim given at various paces and styles. Although there are significant differences between Torah learning and secular studies, it is noteworthy that in the former case students can choose what kind of shiur to attend. Perhaps survey courses should be optional as well, rather than a requirement; students should have the option to decide which kinds of courses work best for them.

The purpose of this article is not to resolve our central question, but merely to elucidate some of the key arguments for each side, to point out an inconsistency in YC's educational philosophy, and to advocate that the keys to undergraduate education should to a greater extent be placed in the hands of those who are being educated: the students.



### MENTAL ILLNESS, CONTINUED FROM 20

ter (I happen to be inclined to draw from Jewish sources, such as the Torah and the Rabbis, for support on unclear ethical dilemmas).

- "He didn't quote enough sources." I drew from a few scientific journals only to highlight my arguments, which stand just as well without any academic backing. Any sourcing I did was only for clarification or support. They were by no means the main stuff of my argument.

- "He associated gender dysphoria with other bad illnesses." This statement is not telling the whole story. My comparisons were only for the purpose of the important ethical question, and don't carry over to any other aspects of illnesses, physical or otherwise.

- "He said that Ben Shapiro was right." As it happens, my own view is that Ben Shapiro is probably less trustworthy on these matters because of his flawed arguing

and discourse styles. So I would not, and did not, say that he was right. But, insofar as he is intelligent and worldly, he is as justified as anyone else in evaluating whether or not a certain mental state is a mental illness.

- "He said that doctors are wrong about classifying mental illnesses." I am *not* saying that doctors are wrong. People with undesirable mental states (depression, for example) should certainly seek out relevant professionals for treatment. Doctors are in the best position to determine how to change the body to treat a condition. As for the ethical question, though, doctors (and psychiatric associations) are not inherently, by virtue of their positions, the highest authorities on determining what is and what isn't a mental illness.

This piece is in no way meant to delegitimize very serious and very real mental illnesses. In fact, I hope it has the opposite effect of igniting the incredibly important

conversation about the seriousness of mental illnesses and the need for minimizing any stigmatization of the topic. Whether or not some state is technically a mental illness, a person suffering from any condition deserves respect and support. Those exhibiting mental illnesses must not be unjustly looked down upon.

Again, please read my words slowly and prudently. If you, dear reader, find yourself reacting viscerally, you probably missed my point. Take another look, and you just might find my claims more interesting and reasonable than you thought. Of course, after a careful reading, I welcome leveled debate on the matter. As I implied at the onset, I remain open to new ideas on this issue. I would very much enjoy to learn from interesting perspectives that you might add.





# Never. Stop. Commentating.

Got something to say?  
Email [doron.levine@mail.yu.edu](mailto:doron.levine@mail.yu.edu)



## Never Again?

By Avigayil Adouth

Every year growing up, come May, our days became a perpetual shuffle to and from assemblies and speeches. For as long as most of us can remember we have been privileged to hear first-hand from people who suffered atrocities at the hands of the Hitler and the Nazi regime. We attended memorial services, and visited museums, be they in our hometowns, Washington DC, or Israel. I would venture to guess that many of us had the opportunity to travel to Poland, either during high school, on a summer trip, or as part of our gap year programs, in a fruitless attempt to wrap our heads around how human beings could be capable of such inconceivable barbarity.

Year in and year out we exclaimed "Never Again"--a declaration of our victory, and a vow to ourselves and to humanity that we would never allow something of this nature to happen again.

I don't recall a year going by where the question "Where was the rest of the world while we were being murdered?" wasn't raised.

But here we are 70 years later and somehow I feel as if "never again" was never more than a catch-phrase--A caption to accompany the picture we took in Poland, standing in a death camp, Israeli flag triumphantly draped over our shoulders.

That our propensity to place so much of the fault on western society was nothing short of hypocritical and unjustified.

Because never again is happening again.

On December 18th the Arabs Spring began. Across the Middle East, authoritarian leaders were being overthrown in favor of governments that promised democratization. In early 2011 the movement reached Syria. The Syrian protest however, was far more passive than

protests had been in its neighboring countries. Inspired by the movement to westernize their political process, peaceful protestors took to the streets of Syria in an attempt to spread democratic ideals. Bashar al-Assad, the Shiite leader of a country made up of 82% Sunni Muslims, well aware of the power of the masses to overturn their government, began using violence to suppress the protests. Abbas' use of excessive force against Syrian civilians led to the rise of over 15 rebel groups, and thus a Syrian Civil War began. Although this is an enormous simplification of a situation made far more complicated by the rise of ISIS, and the nuances and intricacies of foreign relations, the point holds true.

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### "IF NOTHING MORE, WE HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TO RECOGNIZE THAT "NEVER AGAIN" IS HAPPENING AGAIN RIGHT NOW IN OUR TIME."

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Once again families are being ripped apart at the hands of a merciless government, this time by bombings and airstrikes. Over the past 5 years, 450,000 innocent men, women, and children have been murdered by the very government they once swore their allegiance to, persecuted for nothing more than the sect of Islam they belong to.

Innocent citizens are being murdered for sport on the very streets they grew up on. Over 12 million people have been displaced, and on any given day prior to the regime's conquest, about 50,000 people attempt to flee from Aleppo, once Syria's most populous city. Proper

medical care is completely inaccessible, and food supply has been cut off from over 10,000 innocent children.

And here I sit, and I can't help but consider:

Where is the world now?

Can we honestly claim to be doing anything more than the Americans were doing in the 1940's? Or, are we guilty of the same crime we've indicted the world of time and time again?

Will the history books speak any differently of us than we speak of those who lived during WWII?

In the words of Elie Wiesel ז"ל "There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest".

We may not have the ability to solve the humanitarian crisis in Syria, or the power to bring down the Assad regime, but we definitely have the power and strength to heed the call of Elie Wiesel, and speak out in protest.

Because no matter who we are, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, or Atheists, we are all human beings, we were all created in the image of God, and none of us deserve to be massacred.

If nothing more, we have a responsibility to speak out,

If nothing more, we have a responsibility to recognize that "never again" is happening again right now in our time.

And we need to acknowledge that maybe, just maybe, during the Holocaust the rest of the world, looked a lot like we do right now. They may have been sitting on their beds in a small dorm room, much like ours, more concerned with their midterm grades than with genocide. They may have been more focused on their plans for winter break, than they were with speaking out on behalf those poor innocent Jews being murdered a half a world away.

## How Not to Solve Social Issues

By Joey Chesir

In recent years, so-called "social issues" have become prominent in the American news cycle. These issues, which include acts of racism performed against minorities, and incidents of sexism directed at members of opposing genders, have received much media attention and have been cited by politicians, celebrities, journalists and common citizens alike as being highly important.

Discussion of social issues increased dramatically in the wake of the Trayvon Martin shooting in 2012, the shootings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014, and more recently, the shootings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling earlier this year. In all of these incidents, many claimed that race played a factor in the victims being shot, and that those who initiated these incidents used excessive force on the victims. Additionally, many citizens asserted these incidents were examples of systemic flaws in American law enforcement, and sparked significant backlash throughout the country. Groups like Black Lives Matter aggressively protested in response to these incidents, and a number of police officers were assaulted in what appeared to be retaliatory attacks.

Social issues are now in the public eye, and many are demanding injustices be curtailed and corrected. Citizens have attempted to combat these issues in various ways, including discussing these issues, protesting in response to specific incidents, or posting on social media. However, in order to make a significant difference towards the solution of social issues, citizens need to recognize that only actions focused on solving social issues will be beneficial towards solving them, and that merely discussing, publicizing, or protesting these issues will be of little assistance to those suffering from them.

For many citizens, incidents of police violence were highly inflammatory, and many desired a way to help end incidents of possible police brutality, or any other episode that potentially involved racism. A number of famous citizens used various methods to spread a message of protest, including NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick's famous refusal to stand during the recitation of the national anthem before a game. Other citizens posted on social media in response to these incidents, often using the famous hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to show their support for the African-American cause. These actions were certainly made with proper intentions, which were obviously

to help end racism in American society. However, it is important to recognize that technically speaking, the implementation of social justice in America is not any closer to being realized after a multitude of social media posts, or if a famous athlete kneels during the national anthem, because these problems do not technically address social issues in any way, even if they're meant to express "support".

It is a huge misconception among American citizens that showing "support" for one cause or another is in any way helpful towards the furthering of the interest of that cause.

Social issues are, without question, a major problem in America that plague many citizens, and we should certainly be attempting to take any possible measure in order to fix them. Showing "support" on behalf of the victims may seem like a way for citizens to contribute on their behalf, but ultimately, doing so does not in any way benefit the victims or help solve social issues.

If there are people in America suffering from racism, the fact that Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem does not in any way remedy their situation, and whatever racism they are forced to deal with will continue as it did beforehand. In fact, it can be argued that Kaepernick's charitable donation of \$1 million to organizations attempting to combat racial injustice made a much more significant impact on the solving of racial issues than his national anthem protest, which garnered far more attention and media coverage. Money can be used to actually provide assistance to victims of racism, in ways that are actually tangible, while kneeling during the national anthem simply "sparks discussion". "Discussion" is simply not a helpful tool that can be used to solve any issue, regardless of those issues involve racism or sexism, and only involves the acquisition of attention.

The problem with merely discussing, publicizing, or posting in regards to an issue is not that they are made with poor intentions, because they are intended to be helpful. The problem is that discussing, publicizing, or posting about issue often reinforces the delusion that doing so actually makes a difference in terms of solving the issue in question. When someone posts on social media in regards to social issues (or any other issue), they often feel that they have made a positive impact on the issue, and that they are helping to fix it. This notion is simply incorrect. The biggest issue with this misconception is that

the victims of racism or sexism, who actually require assistance, are going to continue suffering from these problems, while citizens who can help are instead deluding themselves about the importance of merely talking about these issues, instead of actually making a contribution.

It is always important, when attempting to solve any issue, to comprehend that action and discussion are by definition, two different things. We will never solve social issues, or any other societal problem, if we pretend that it is enough to have "conversations" about these problems, because nothing is accomplished by talking alone. Active participation in democracy is one of many ways in which citizens can attempt to assist those suffering from social issues. It will be necessary to utilize tools such as this in order to actually make a positive impact on the solving of social issues in the future.

Historically, civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King and Susan B. Anthony were instrumental in solving social injustices being performed against African Americans and women, respectively. It is important to recognize that both of these figures made an impact by doing more than merely discussing the issues which they attempted to fix. Because of the contributions of Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists, segregation and other racist practices were ended in the South of the United States. Women's rights activists such as Susan B. Anthony were instrumental in acquiring the right to vote for women, which was one of the turning points in the treatment of women in American society. For both King and Anthony, the actions of accomplishments of both ultimately cemented their legacies as civil rights activists. In modern times, it is important to acknowledge that citizens will not perform similar accomplishments on behalf of victims of social issues if they believe that merely disseminating these issues will make an impact to the same degree of the actions of King and Anthony.

In order to solve social issues, citizens need to comprehend that merely discussing these issues is not adequate in terms of making a positive impact on behalf of the victims. Citizens should attempt to make a contribution towards the solving of social issues by utilizing any of the methods available in the 21st century to do so. Social issues, just like any other societal problem, can only be solved by actions in response to them, instead of mere discussion.



## Farewell Thoughts from This Business Editor

By Etan Neiman

It's been hundreds, at least. Since I received the honor of joining the ranks of *Commentator* editors, I've received hundreds of pitches for articles from students and school officials. With each pitched article, I immediately flocked to the same question: would publishing this topic provide value to the students of Yeshiva University? That has been my driving force since I became Business Editor and before that, when I was a staff writer: Provide value and sometimes a voice to the student body.

Whether it has been by publishing pieces aimed at helping students secure accounting jobs, jobs in other industries, keep up with the latest Syms happenings, or gain knowledge of the finance and business world, I am humbled by the value I have been allowed to provide to the students of this tremendous University. Oftentimes, providing value meant publishing pieces the YU administration may appreciate. One such piece was highlighting all the great things about the programs' five majors through an interview with the five departmental chairs. Sometimes, providing value meant publishing pieces which resulted in top administration officials expressing their displeasure with the article.

Since my responsibility was never to the YU or Syms administration, I did my best not to let any rebukes shake or affect me in performing my duty to the students of providing them value and sometimes a voice. I hope my readers feel that my writing and editing lived up to this standard.

This focus on serving readership should not be unique to Yeshiva University's official school newspaper. Every newspaper or media outlet must, absolutely must, be devoted to serving the interests of its readership or viewership. It seems that far too often in today's society, newspapers and other media outlets exist only to serve themselves and will, therefore, proceed with any story if they feel it will help make them an extra buck. Yes, I am pointing my finger squarely at news outlets who proclaim to be

mainstream and unbiased, such as ABC, CBS, CNN and NBC. A quick YouTube search will show that they are far from unbiased. Outlets such as Fox News and MSNBC are actually a shining light in today's dark world of skewed media. While granted that they exist to make money and certainly serve particular ideologies, they do not pretend to be without bias. The selfish and politically skewed approach of the above listed and other self-proclaimed impartial news outlets does little more than harm the very people they are supposed to be serving, by infusing them with false or misleading narratives masked as impartial

**"I AM HUMBLLED BY THE VALUE I HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO PROVIDE TO THE STUDENTS OF THIS TREMENDOUS UNIVERSITY!"**



narratives.

Hellos are awkward and goodbyes stink. I'll take the awkwardness over the latter any day. Yet, here I am, wishing you, my readers, farewell. My time as editor would have been painfully impossible without my strong team of writers. Thank you to those who have stuck by my side. I must single out Ariel Axelrod, Avishai Cohen and Ezra Berman, but the rest who have written for me along the way know who you are. I couldn't have done it without you.

I would be foolish not to thank Raymond Cohen, the founder of the *Commentator* Business Section, who brought me aboard a year and a half ago and later entrusted me to help continue his strong legacy. On the topic of editors, these past two semesters would have been a far more difficult journey without the guidance and steady hand of fellow Business Editor Adam Kramer. Thank you to Yechiel Schwab, last year's Editor-in-Chief, for welcoming me mid-year with open arms and putting up with my at times over-the-top excitement. Thank you as well to this year's Editor-in-Chief, Doron Levine; it is beyond me how good you have continued to be to me in spite of my occasional mistake.

My most unforgettable article had zero to do with business. In last year's final edition, I used the *Commentator*'s strong platform to pen the article *It is Time to End the Secrecy: My Mental Health*. In it, I detailed my battles with mental illness and message that we, as a society, must end the secrecy surrounding mental health and how doing so will help put to bed the damaging and laughing untrue stigmas of mental health illnesses.

Lastly and most importantly, I must thank my readers: There is no Business Editor, or paper for that matter, without its readers. So, I thank every one of you for sticking with me and the paper and making these past three semesters perhaps the most successful the *Commentator* has ever had. It has been a pleasure and privilege to serve you. Let's do this again sometime, but for now, this is farewell.

## Download Nexar Before You Drive Your Next Car

By Benjamin Zirman

As a young kid, I still remember wondering when The Jetsons' futuristic world would become reality. More specifically, I dreamed of a future with flying cars whizzing around the world without any traffic or constraints. Although the technology for flying cars is still a work in progress, there is no doubt that our cars are getting smarter and smarter and I think in the next couple of years self-driving cars will be more and more popular. Driverless car technology that removes human error from the driving experience saw an eruption of interest in 2016 by corporations and investors. According to CB Insights, a NY based data company, there have been a dozen venture capital-backed exits in the auto tech sector since 2012, with five in 2016 alone. But there are many problems with autonomous vehicles as current projections have them costing anywhere between \$20K to \$50K and it will require trillions of dollars with decades of production to get penetration high enough to rid the world of accidents.

Nexar has developed an artificial intelligence dashcam app that operates through machine vision and sensory algorithms using the driver's phone sensors to analyze and understand the car's surroundings and provide protective documentation in case of accidents. Nexar has a goal to one day rid the world of car accidents.

Car crashes are one of the most significant problems in the world today, with nearly 1.3 million people dying in road crashes each year; an average of 3,287 deaths a day. Additionally, 20-50 million are injured or disabled from accidents. Road crashes are the leading cause of death among young people ages 15-29, and the second leading cause of death worldwide among young people ages 5-14. What's more, the rates of collisions and fatalities are growing around 10% year over year for the last five years. In America, over 37,000 people die in road crashes each year while an additional 2.35 million are injured or disabled. Per the Association for Safe International Road Travel, unless action is taken, road traffic injuries are pre-

dicted to become the fifth leading cause of death by 2030.

Nexar was founded by Eran Shir and Bruno Fernandez-Ruiz in early 2015. Eran Shir serves as the CEO and is a serial entrepreneur and investor. Before Nexar, Eran was an Entrepreneur in Residence at Aleph VC and served as an executive at Yahoo following Yahoo's acquisition of his previous startup, Dapper. Eran explained Nexar in his own words: "We're about trying to build a new, scalable and democratic mechanism to prevent collisions. Given the technology that exists today, the fact that there are still tens of thousands of fatal vehicle collisions in the US each year is unacceptable. We can't afford to wait for the advent of autonomous cars to remove human error from the equation. With Nexar, users can avoid unfortunate accidents by getting more pertinent information about the road in real-time, saving lives and making the roads a safer place for everyone." Bruno Fernandez-Ruiz, currently serves as the CTO, is a technologist on a mission to change the world using data and machine learning. Before Nexar, Bruno was a Yahoo Senior Fellow, leading Yahoo's ad targeting and advertising teams. Before joining Yahoo, Bruno held technology leadership roles at Fidelity Investments and Accenture's Center for Strategic Research Group. They currently have 25 other employees continuing to develop the company's product. Nexar raised a \$4 million Series A funding round in May 2015 from Aleph VC and Slow Ventures. It followed this up by raising \$10.5 million in June 2016 in a second round of Series A funding. This round was led by Mosaic Ventures and True Ventures with contributions from prior investors Aleph and Slow Ventures. The company has offices in Tel Aviv and San Francisco and is looking to add even more people to their staff in both locations.

What exactly does the Nexar app offer? In short, the promise of vehicle-to-vehicle technology is connecting vehicles so they behave more like a school of fish than a collection of selfish, berserk rhinos. Nexar is a real-time network connecting cars nearby. Using this vehicle-to-vehicle network (V2V network), Nexar can warn its users in real-time of dangerous situations happening beyond

each individual driver's line of sight. The app can issue a forward collision warning, giving drivers more time to react, so they have a chance to plan around it. The app makes use of your phone's camera, accelerometer, and gyroscope, noting when you pump the brakes, where you are on the road, and whether other vehicles are nearby. It relies on machine learning to interpret that data, so the more experience the app gets on the road, the better it becomes at spotting problems and warning drivers. Nexar's vision is that when enough drivers start using the app, the vehicle-to-vehicle network will get better at alerting drivers about upcoming accidents or someone doing a hard stop a few cars ahead. Additionally, the depth of Nexar's on-device analysis allows it to create a collision reconstruction report that completely transforms the insurance claims process. Nexar adds a video of the crash to the claim, alongside a detailed reconstruction based on the phone's sensor readings. Nexar's technology has a lot of life-saving potential that they are waiting to unleash with the growth of their V2V network.

On top of this, the company is even planning to roll out driving scores, assigned by driving habits and tied to license plate numbers, as well. Nexar can keep tabs on specific dangerous and rude drivers by remembering their license plate and ranking them. So, you may be warned to avoid a driver in front of you if Nexar knows that they have a tendency of driving too fast or braking too hard. Nexar is trying to perfect how to deliver information and specific tips to drivers, such as to stop taking right turns so hard or back off that truck in front of you. Regardless, knowing that you have a bad driver nearby could be a huge help on the road. As the saying goes, driving isn't just about being a good driver, but knowing how to avoid the bad drivers.

In February 2016, Nexar launched their iOS Apple app and in August released the Android version. Before Nexar launched in February they ran a six-month beta-testing

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period in Tel-Aviv. There are two notable differences between the older iOS and the Android version of the app. First, the Android version has a dual-camera mode, meaning that drivers can record inside and outside the vehicle simultaneously. On iOS it's only possible to record through one at a time. This should help increase usage by professional drivers, such as those who work with Uber or Lyft, as they can track what's happening on the roads while also recording passengers to help settle disputes at a later point. The second notable difference is that on Android, Nexar can be used in the background, meaning users can switch to whatever other apps they like, and Nexar will still record. This will be important to those who prefer to use other navigation apps as opposed to Nexar's navigation.

Nexar is among the first companies to tap Waze's transport SDK, bringing the Google-owned company's crowdsourced navigation data into the mix. Waze Transport SDK links your app to Waze and provides free driving data including ETA & routing points. Waze announced its new SDK back in January 2016 and included a number of notable companies for the launch, including Genesis Pulse, JustPark, Cornershop, Cabify, 99Taxis, and Lyft. Though it's free to use, companies still have to apply, so access is not automatically granted. Thanks to the Waze integration, Nexar users can now switch between the two services with minimal effort: a long tap opens a menu to input a destination. Users can also receive turn-by-turn navigation through audio directions, negating the need to interact with the app directly. And this ties in with the underlying safety element that Nexar pitches as one of its core selling points as you can plug your destination in at the start of a ride and then simply let the dashcam do its thing from then on. "Safety and navigation are both essential in creating an optimal driving experience," said Shir. "Partnering with Waze, the world's largest navigation app, is a perfect fit for us. Our users can now enjoy the peace of mind of driving with Nexar and still be able to get to their destination through the most efficient route."

Ultimately, Nexar has a large target market, which is why it could become one of the

must-have apps. Anyone who drives a car—from Sunday-afternoon cruisers to 24/7 Uber drivers—could find a use for this, and the more uptake it gets, the better it should become as a safety tool for drivers. But how, exactly, does Nexar plan to turn their app into revenue? One idea is bringing insurance companies and fleets to the 21st century. They could streamline insurance companies' claims process with a unique accident 3D reconstruction. This would allow insurance companies to personalize their offerings and provide discounts to safe drivers. Already, insurance companies have teamed up with the startup to reward drivers for good behavior. Another possible revenue stream would be similar to how other free apps generate revenue, by selling anonymized data. One example would be automakers using Nexar's incredible amount of data to understand what happens to cars on the road, as these automakers try to improve their auto design or technology.

Nexar isn't the first company to utilize V2V technology to prevent accidents. The Department of Transportation had developed its own V2V solution, a Dedicated Short Range Communications system that works through short or medium range wireless channels. The problem is, it requires building new capabilities into every car. While automakers are starting to make that happen, market penetration will take a long time. On the other hand, since Nexar uses your phone and a mount for the windshield, it is far more economical than buying

a new car or redesigning every pre-existing car. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration hoped that sometime in 2020 this vision of vehicle-to-vehicle communication would start to become a reality. Automakers then forecasted it would take another five years for enough cars to be equipped with V2V technology to start to see safer roads and a sharp decline in road fatalities. The idea of waiting until 2025 in order to see safer roads is an awfully long time. Nexar has exceeded expectations and totally redefined the speed and implementation of this technology.

However, it isn't all rainbows and butterflies when looking at the capabilities of this app. Since the Nexar app is constantly using your phone's camera to survey the road, it's sending all that data back to its Israel-based servers for analysis. Opting into the app means that Nexar has every right to do whatever it wants with your data, including selling it to third parties, as was discussed earlier. And though the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration says there isn't a formal agreement in place, there are sources that say Nexar has agreed to share driving data with the government. So, your driving data is being sold to other companies or the government and that is a scary thought for people scared of being followed or tracked. Also, the amount of data it will use on your phone is unclear and that could provide additional costs and problems depending on driver's cell phone plans.

Shir said back during the summer of 2016 before the Android version release, "In the first six months of 2016, there's been a nine percent increase in motor vehicle fatalities in the U.S., and this is a global trend. Already today, drivers who use Nexar can get evidence and protect themselves in case of a crash. Furthermore, when drivers use Nexar, they join a network with other drivers. The network crowdsources real-time hazards on the road and eventually, as the network grows, it will warn drivers in real time of potentially dangerous situations." He reported that drivers have notched up more than eight million miles in its app since its launch on iOS, with more than half-a-million "dangerous driving" incidents clocked, and more than one hundred crashes documented. If Nexar will be successful, it will need these numbers to continue to grow as they strive to create a driving network that will make the roads safer for everyone.



## ***Are The Big Four Accounting Firms and Grant Thornton as Great as they Seem?***

By Etan Neiman

There is a harmful perception which is pushed at accounting students in colleges across the country and Yeshiva University is no exception. Students, professors and others are all complicit in allowing the advancement of this terribly false narrative. For various reasons, those with a voice who are aware of this inaccurate perception decide not to speak up. I am no longer willing to be one of those people. It is time to say what many won't: Working at the Big Four accounting firms is not all it is cracked up to be.

Students are trained to eat, sleep, and breathe four glorious firms by the names of Deloitte, EY, KPMG, and PwC. If a professor references a firm in class, it is one of those four. If a speaker is brought in, he or she will be from one of those four firms. Students dream of calling their parents with the news that they will be beginning employment at a Big Four firm. All that this amounts to is a tremendous disservice to many accounting students who zero in on a firm or firms which are not the right fit for them.

Though I am about to present some harsh and perhaps over-the-top critiques of the Big Four and later on Grant Thornton, make no mistake about it: These firms have some indisputable positives and absolutely represent great fits for many aspiring accountants, just they are not the right choice for everyone. Please do not miscategorize this article as an attack piece. This article's purpose

is to highlight the importance of finding the right fit in one's employer and not necessarily flocking to the shiniest names. To enable that mindset, I feel it necessitates highlighting some of the usually not discussed negatives which can come with working for a Big Four firm or Grant Thornton. For the sake of transparency, much of this piece should be classified as opinion and not taken as absolute fact. Though I am confident in the information I have gleaned over my time as Commentator Business Editor, the nature of this piece makes it tricky to provide concrete facts or sources.

Some of the reasons a Big Four recruiter may cite as to why their firm is the best are the opportunity for varied experiences made possible by their variety of large clients, scheduling flexibility, strong firm resources, and the network of brilliant partners to learn from. To systematically debunk or clarify these supposed advantages one-by-one, though it is true that the Big Four impressively boast clients littered across the Fortune 500, a very common experience working for these firms as an associate is to spend all of one's time working in the same industry for the same client. Even worse, in many cases, one will not be allowed to as much as glimpse the client until he or she has been working for the firm for many years. Citing her reason for leaving KPMG after spending just one year as an associate and enjoying her time with the firm, a companion at a Shabbat lunch table remarked, "I asked to switch to a different client and was told no."

Regarding the claim two high ranking employees at Big Four firms made to me about the tremendous scheduling

flexibility enjoyed at their places of work, the Big Four are notorious for their unforgiving hours and demanding superiors. Working on weekends is common practice, while associates will depart the office as late as midnight during busy season. To be fair, the claim of these employees was in reference to flexibility in regards to taking time off for religious holidays and it is true that one will not find any problem leaving for Shabbat and holidays at the Big Four. However, I believe it is fair to say just about any company or firm, particularly in New York, allows an employee to drain away their vacation days on religious holidays.

Make no mistake about it; the Big Four firms have top-notch resources. A tour of PwC's midtown office will show a gorgeous (not kosher) cafeteria, stunning décor, and the most up-to-date technology. However, the important resources to one's success can as well be found at midsize and even small firms.

To address the learning opportunity from the network of partners supposedly made possible at a Big Four firm, while it is true that there are many brilliant partners and minds at these firms, often times associates report that upon beginning employment the partners are understandably largely inaccessible due to the partners' own demanding schedules. This is in stark contrast to the open door policy enjoyed at many midsize firms such as Anchin Block & Anchin, where the office doors of partners are literally almost always open. In fact, one high ranking

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official at a Big Four firm reported in a previous Commentator article that one would be ill-advised to leave their firm or similar firms before they become manager (which generally takes about five years) because staff members “do not learn enough in only two or three years.” On the one hand, this quote was in the context of the firm’s understandable desire for associates not to quickly leave. On the other hand, it does suggest that meaningfully growing one’s accounting knowledge may take several years at a Big Four firm.

One supposed advantage of Big Four firms which, in fairness, recruiters do not claim but is still a perception is that the Big Four pays handsomely more. That is flatly untrue. Taking EY for example, according to PayScale, starting salaries for EY staff accountants oscillate greatly and have a national median of \$55,133. Certainly though, that number is higher in New York City due to the inflated prices and salaries of the city. Even after adjusting for the city’s price inflation, this salary figure is right in line with the starting salary one can expect at many midsize or even small firms. When factoring in the additional work hours necessary at a Big Four firm as opposed to midsize firms, the salary does not very much compete with that of midsize firms.

There is, however, one unquestionable advantage of working at a Big Four accounting firm and it appears on one’s resume. If one is looking for what is likely to be a temporary job for a year or so, the Big Four offers invaluable name recognition which can help in securing one’s next position. At a Big Four firm’s “Super Day”, a pair of recruiters even boasted during a presentation that their employees are constantly getting calls from competitors or various companies trying to poach them. However, it did seem as though it was almost a selling point about how easy it would be to one day leave that firm, if one were to accept their offer.

In contrast to the drawbacks a Big Four firm can offer, there are tremendous midsize firms which present

what could be better fits. Some examples of firms which may for various reasons be a better fit for a YU student than a Big Four firm are Anchin Block & Anchin, Brand Sonnenshine, Citrin Cooperman, CohnReznick, Loeb & Troper, and WeiserMazars. Brand Sonnenshine and Loeb & Troper offer the unique advantage of not having to take vacation time for Jewish holidays. Anchin Block & Anchin and Citrin Cooperman are maybe the most devoted firms to fostering a growth environment and open-door policy. A second year associate at Anchin reported that only five people of his entire starting class were no longer with the firm. CohnReznick and WeiserMazars, near the top end of the midsize firm class in terms of

### “I IMPLORE EVERY ACCOUNTING STUDENT... TO EXPLORE WITH AN OPEN MIND WHICH FIRM IS RIGHT FOR THEM.”

revenue, offer a comfortable balance of growing within the firm and boasting impressive clients of their own. In addition to these, countless other midsize firms offer the trademark midsize qualities of an environment where an entry-level employee could likely spend many happy years, exhibit tremendous growth in their accounting knowledge, enjoy a variety of different types of work exposures, and have reasonable hours. Again, this is all available at salaries which are largely very comparable to those of a Big Four firm. Of course, the most noted downside of a midsize firm is that the household names which look best on one’s resume lie with the Big Four.

An important clarification which must be made is that though the popular term is the Big Four, there is in actuality one additional firm which is popular amongst Syms students and worthy of some of the drawbacks detailed above: Grant Thornton. They brilliantly and deceptively brand themselves as having the advantages offered at both midsize and large firms. (I am paraphrasing to reflect my opinion.) I myself at one time fell for this sneaky

marketing and even wrote an article last February which in part detailed many of the advantages Grant Thornton can offer. For the first and hopefully last time in my journalistic career, I retract every single letter of that article as it pertains to Grant Thornton and cannot ask enough for the forgiveness of my readers for publicizing this untrue narrative. I have taken down the online version of the article so it cannot do any further damage.

While Grant Thornton is technically classified as a midsize firm due to their steep drop off in revenue from the Big Four, they are certainly still very large with revenue in excess of \$1.4 billion according to Vault. To my point, I have found over my years speaking with members of the industry that Grant Thornton offers similar downsides to the Big Four in areas such as work hours and being tied to one client or industry, only without the same level of legitimate prestige which a Big Four staff member benefits from. Though some, particularly those employed by Grant Thornton, may offer possibly fair arguments to this characterization, working at Grant Thornton is in some ways a lose-lose.

In spite of the harsh assessment offered above of the Big Four and Grant Thornton, I cannot stress enough that they truly do have many positives and represent a tremendous fit for many accounting students. That is what this article is about at its core: the extreme importance of finding one’s own right fit for employment as opposed to letting general perceptions dictate one’s right fit. Since the narrative is not often shared for various reasons, I felt it to be of paramount importance to outline in detail some of the negatives the Big Four and Grant Thornton may represent.

I implore every accounting student, from a 3.00 to 4.00 G.P.A., to explore with an open mind which firm is right for them. Maybe one will decide the advantages of the Big Four outweigh the drawbacks. Maybe one will find that some of my claims above are exaggerated or not consistent with reality. Regardless, deciding on the ideal firm where an accounting student will start his or her career is one of the most important decisions he or she will make. It’s time to break the harmful perception that the Big Four accounting firms are the best fit for everyone.

## Tamid Pitch Night

By Isaac Greenberg

Yeshiva University’s Tamid chapter had a unique opportunity on Tuesday, December 20th to present startup ideas to venture capitalists in a pitch competition. Tamid is a campus club with branches in colleges all over the country. Tamid’s program is designed to offer experiential business learning, with students participating in an interactive classroom curriculum during their first semester on campus, followed by hands-on experience working with companies in Israel in subsequent semesters.

The pitch night event was the culmination of this educational semester that all first-semester Tamid members across all campus chapters participate in. The central part of this first-semester educational curriculum was preparing a startup idea, including competitive analyses and creating plans for business development and marketing. Then, at this pitch competition, the teams pitched their startup ideas to two venture capitalists who provided feedback to the teams and ultimately decided on a winner. The two venture capitalist judges were Joseph Tuchman, a former President of Tamid at University of Maryland who now works at Lead Edge Capital, and Adi Levanon, who is a venture partner at an early-stage venture capital firm called Symmetrical Ventures.

Initially there were eight teams in the Tamid club who came up with startup ideas and they all pitched their ideas to Tamid club leaders. The leaders selected the best four that presented and those four teams went on to pitch their ideas to the venture capitalists.

The first team to present was UCharge Mobile, a company that could be compared to “Citi Bikes,” but instead would allow people to rent phone chargers. Their pitch presented the simple problem that no one likes when they run out of battery on their cell phone or other devices. UCharge Mobile’s proposed solution is to place vending machines all over the city with chargers that can be rented and that people could take with them while on the move. From a profitability standpoint, UCharge Mobile believes that because there are so many electronic devices

in the market and that this number is continually increasing, more people will need a service such as this one. One would be charged per hour or could get a monthly subscription for UCharge Mobile. The judges had the UCharge Mobile team walk them through just how this process of getting a charger, paying for it, using it, and then returning it, would work.

The following group was Planit, which is an app that tailors personal itineraries for the user. Their idea is to combine the services of Yelp and Stubhub into a platform that would show reviews and allow one to buy the tickets. They plan to target young adults such as college students. The site allows one to match a budget with whatever activities are available in the area. The group presented a prototype app, which is just the beginning of where they hope their company will be. The app’s main stream of revenue is advertising and they believe it will be very profitable because users are constantly searching. The VCs asks for them to walk them through the financials again and how will they be making money. They also asked what really makes them different than other similar companies. For anyone who just doesn’t have the time to make their own itinerary, this app seems like it would be perfect.

The next company to present was EasyMeal an app that would simplify one’s dining experience. They plan to target the massive restaurant industry in New York. The app would have pictures of all the foods on the menu and in all different languages, and would reward customers in order to entice them to use the app more. The first 3 months of the app would be free, with a monthly subscription fee thereafter. The app will also include detailed reviews on all restaurants that are in the city. The judges were a bit more critical of this startup idea than they were of the previous groups; in particular, they questioned the startup’s proposed business model and asked how the app would make money.

The last company to present called themselves Stuff Yo Self Cupcakes, and presented a plan to open stores that allow customers to make personalized cupcakes. There has not been much growth in the \$1.8 billion cupcake market,

with the current options either too expensive or cheap, and all unhealthy. Their idea is



similar to the froyo model that has become popular in recent years thanks to chains like 16 Handles, where the customer goes to the shop and makes their own frozen yogurt. With cupcakes, the customer would choose a batter, filling, and toppings for their cupcake, and then it would be cooked in around 6 minutes. During these 6 minutes, younger customers will be able draw pictures on store’s glass tables and walls. The store will also offer smoothies and hot chocolate for purchase, and would have a room for birthday parties so that a group can come and make custom cupcakes.

After deliberating for close to 10 minutes, the judges announced this last group, Stuff Yo Self cupcakes, as the winner of the competition. The judges saw a future for the company and wanted to put them on a path for success. They always made sure that there was a clear way for the ideas to consistently make money over time. In addition they always looked for ideas that would have demand and have a large target market. These presentations, as well as the judges’ insight and criticism that followed each group, were a valuable opportunity to see how actual venture capitalists value and analyze companies. Hopefully some of the groups that pitched ideas will be motivated to turn these ideas--or really any other startup concepts--into actual businesses that can received funding from venture capital firms.



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