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THE EIGHT IVYS AND THE SEVEN SISTERS

In the late 1950s, Jewish day school graduates began finding themselves in Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges¹ – and I [**Dr. Rivkah Blau**] was one of them.

On campus, we encountered an environment that was often hostile to Jews. Classes were held on Shabbat and exams were often given on holidays; we bought our own kosher food, but we still had to pay for room and board and could not bring our food into the dormitories. We also found that people were asking us questions about Judaism that we couldn't answer. Despite our years of yeshiva education, many of us felt that we didn't know enough, and we wanted to continue learning.

We began organizing different groups: At Barnard, where I was, we called our group *Ari*; at Columbia, they called theirs *Yeshurun* and used to gather for afternoon prayers in the laboratory of a doctoral student; in Harvard, they called it *Taryag*; while Cornell had a Young Israel House with a kosher kitchen.

Once we heard about each other, we decided to establish a single body to coordinate all the groups. We called it *Yavneh* and our founding convention was in February 1960. Our goal was to promote Jewish learning and observance on campus, to ensure that Jewish students wouldn't feel alone, and that if they wanted to learn more, we would be there to help them.

Everybody had his or her own reason for the name, but I was trying to carry on an organization that my father, **Rabbi Mordechai-Pinchas Teitz**,² had started before immigrating to America, when he was a fourteen-year-old in Latvia. After coming home from the Ponevezh yeshiva and discovering that the boys he had grown up with had joined the Communist Party, he founded a club – *Yavneh* – for Jewish boys to learn and have fun while getting a better feeling about their Jewishness.

Communal leaders took a keen interest in our new group and rabbis like my father and **Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik** thought it was a wonderful initiative, as did **the Lubavitcher Rebbe**. They helped us by speaking on our behalf, raising money for us, introducing us to influential people, and doing whatever they could to help *Yavneh* flourish.

¹ In those days, The Ivy League colleges were all-male, but most of them had associated all-women colleges.

² Long term Rabbi and community leader in Elizabeth, NJ. (See also, story #216 in this Email stories list.)

At first, I was the secretary of the organization. By the next year, 1961, I was its vice-president. At around this time, the Rebbe had a representative, **Rabbi Moshe Feller**,³ who would come to Columbia and who became friendly with the president of Yavneh, Joel Levine. This young rabbi told Joel, who then told me, that the Rebbe wanted to meet with two officers of Yavneh, to discuss our activities and how we had gotten started.

Our appointment was for ten o'clock at night, but when we came to 770 Eastern Parkway there were so many people waiting to see him that we only came into his office at midnight. The Rebbe greeted us warmly; I brought him regards from my father, and he sent regards back. He was behind a desk, and he asked us to sit in two chairs across from him.

The Rebbe started listing the languages in which we could conduct the meeting – it was a funny moment, since he was giving so many options, and he did it with a smile. When he reached Russian or French, we settled on English as our language of choice.

He began asking us many detailed questions. He wanted to know how we had started Yavneh and how we had found each other; the problems, the possibilities, and the opportunities for people who were interested in finding out more about their Jewishness; our plan for reaching those people; what we found worked well and what did not. He had a purpose, and his questions were to the point.

I didn't know it at that time, but it became evident to me later on that since Chabad was planning to set up activities for Jewish college students, he wanted to have a sense of what exactly was going on from people who were in the thick of it. At the end he said, "I've asked you a lot of questions; would you like to ask me some questions?"

"No, thank you." I declined. It had been a wonderful meeting and I had nothing to ask him. However, the fellow who was with me did have a question. "I have spent a Shabbat or two here in Crown Heights and I hear all kinds of wonder stories about you. I hear that you know whether a person should have surgery, and you know which way to proceed with a legal case. Do you know more medicine than the doctors? Do you know more law than lawyers? What is this?"

The Rebbe smiled, apparently unperturbed by the audaciousness of the question. "You know," he replied, "when a house is built, the architect draws up a blueprint. He gives the blueprint to the contractor and then the contractor tells the plumber how to do the plumbing, the mason how to do the masonry, the electrician how to do the electrical work. It's not that the contractor can do the tasks better than everybody, but he can read the blueprint, and that's why he can give the instructions."

³ Who since 1962 has been the chief Chabad representative in Minnesota.

He then quoted the *Zohar* which states that the Torah is the blueprint for the world and explained that by understanding Torah, one can determine what should be done in other realms as well. “No, I don’t know law better than the lawyers or medicine better than the doctors, but based on what I have learned in the Torah, I can give people advice.”

I thought that was a beautiful answer and was ready to go, but unfortunately this young man had another question. “Alright,” he persisted, “but I hear these miraculous stories about you. Can they all be true?”

I thought this question was inappropriate, but the Rebbe wasn’t taken aback at all. He had a sense of humor, and he knew how to respond to this young man. Laughing, he said, “People don’t tell me stories about myself – they figure I know them already – so I have no idea what stories are being told about me, and I can’t vouch for them.”

He then gave a list of great Torah sages who were either not chasidic or were opposed to the movement, and said, “I have read stories, in books that I trust, about these people and the wondrous things that they did. You can believe those stories, but I would have to check out the stories that are being told about me.”

It was such a wonderful answer, and he handled the interaction graciously.

When we came out, I saw Rabbi Herschel Schacter waiting in line, and I apologized that our audience had gone on for so long.

“Oh, don’t worry, this is going to go on until 3 or 4 in the morning,” he said. “This is what goes on every night at the Rebbe’s.”

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*Source:* Lightly edited and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from a weekly email of "Here's My Story," a part of JEM's *extraordinary* "My Encounter with the Rebbe" project.

*After earning her PhD at Columbia University, Dr. Rivkah Blau worked as an educator in several yeshivah high schools and colleges, and authored "Learn Torah, Love Torah, Live Torah", a biography of her father, HaRav Mordechai Pinchas Teitz, z'l. She was interviewed in May 2007.*

*Connection: You tell me!*

*Biographical note:*

**Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe** (11 Nissan 1902 - 3 Tammuz 1994), became the seventh Rebbe of the Chabad dynasty after his father-in-law, *Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn*, passed away in Brooklyn on 10 Shvat 1950. He is widely acknowledged as the greatest Jewish leader of the second half of the 20th century. Although a dominant scholar in both the revealed and hidden aspects of Torah and fluent in many languages and scientific subjects, the Rebbe is best known for his extraordinary love and concern for every Jew on the planet. His emissaries around the globe dedicated to strengthening Judaism number in the thousands. Many hundreds of volumes of his teachings have been printed, and hundreds of English renditions too.