

## On the World of the Yeshivot

THE FOLLOWING STORY is told in *yeshivah* circles: When Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hachohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, established his *yeshivah*, Mercaz Harav, he approached, among others, Berl Katznelson, and asked for the Histadrut's support for the new *yeshivah*. When Katznelson submitted Rav Kook's request to the Histadrut executive, he added his own warm recommendation. He explained: "We need to support the *yeshivot*, because it is from there that the next generation of the Labor Movement's leadership will come."

Indeed, it is no secret that the *yeshivot* provided not only the leadership of the religious world, but also the giants who led the Zionist movement in its early years. In fact, many of the leaders of the Labor Movement had grown up within the old-style *batei midrash* and *yeshivot*. From there also came the majority of Hebrew writers and many of the Zionist leaders from the Second and Third Aliyyah periods.

Hayyim Nachman Bialik had been a student at the *yeshivah* in Volozhin, the first of the modern *yeshivot*, although he later left the religious life. Yet, along with poems that were critical of the religious world, he wrote in praise of the *yeshivah*, calling it the "cradle of the nation's spirit."

Even in the darkest days of the Shoah, after the destruction of the centers of Torah learning in Europe—when it seemed that the end of the *yeshivah* world had come—there was an amazing revival in the *yeshivah* world in general, and among the Lithuanian *yeshivot* in particular. In ones and twos, the remnants of Europe's great *yeshivot* who, after the war, had become scattered throughout the world, found the strength to reestablish their *yeshivot* in the towns and cities in which they had found refuge.

Even in far-off Japan and China, the heads of the Mir *yeshivah*, who, together with hundreds of their students, had miraculously escaped from Lithuania before the Nazi invasion, were able to set up a temporary *yeshivah*. Groups of refugees from other *yeshivot* in Poland and Lithuania—stu-

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dents from Kletzk, Kamenitz, Lubavitch and Lublin—who had also found refuge in Japan and China, set up Torah study frameworks for themselves. They even set up printing presses, to produce the necessary volumes of the Talmud and to publish their *hiddushim*. But after the Shoah, most of the *yeshivot* turned to *Eretz Yisrael*.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, dozens of *yeshivot* were set up, bearing the names of the *yeshivot* that once flourished in the towns and cities in Russia, Lithuania, Poland and Hungary: Slobodka, Ponivezh, Telz, Lomza, Pressburg, Lublin, Mir, Novardok, Kamenitz, Radin, and others.

Over 60,000 students of Torah currently make up the student bodies of the *yeshivot* and “kollelim” in Israel. We can state, unhesitatingly, that the State of Israel is the largest Torah study center in the history of the Jewish people since the time of the Mishnah and Talmud.

However, the numeric growth within the *yeshivah* world seems to be in inverse proportion to level of really innovative works being produced. In the past, the so-called “world of the Lithuanian Yeshivahs” or, in Haredi jargon, the “Torah world,” produced Torah giants who enriched the Jewish world with original works of scholarship and far-reaching initiatives. But this tradition has all but disappeared from the *yeshivot* of our own day. The two generations of students who grew up in the *yeshivot* in the State of Israel have not produced giants of Torah scholarship, nor have the *yeshivot* in Israel generated a single Torah work of monumental stature, comparable to those that came out of the *yeshivot* of previous generations.

Some might challenge my conclusions, claiming that I have been too hasty, and that scholars of the stature of those of earlier generations will yet come forth from the *yeshivot* in the State of Israel. If this is a prayer and a hope, it is one which I share wholeheartedly. If it is meant as a counter-argument, I would note that in the State’s first decade there were thousands of young men, in their early twenties, studying in the *yeshivot*. Those young men, who studied without interruption for thirty or forty years or more, are now in their late fifties and early sixties. But we have yet to see a major Torah work, the fruit of the labors of those who grew up in the *yeshivot* of Israel. Furthermore, in the *yeshivot* of previous generations, the students reached their maturity (in terms of Torah knowledge) while in their thirties, began publishing their works while in their forties, and composed their most significant works when in their fifties. By the time they reached their sixties, their works were well known throughout the world, and they had become famous throughout the Jewish world for their Torah scholarship.

When I talk of works of Torah, what I am referring to is those monumental works that have become part of our national cultural and religious heritage, and which, from the time they first appeared, were found to be indispensable.

Although a number of major works have been produced since the establishment of the State of Israel, those who initiated or headed these projects either belonged to the pre-Shoah generation of scholars, or they had acquired their Torah education outside the framework of the Israeli *yeshivot*.

Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, the *Hazon Ish*, published the bulk of his works in Israel, but it would be wrong to ascribe his genius and his works to the world of the Israeli *yeshivot*. We might also note that the first of his works were published when he was only 32 years old.

The Torah projects that did come into being in Israel are many and varied: the *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, whose outline was shaped by Rav Zevin; the *Otzar Ha-poskim*, whose initial framework was set up by the late Chief Rabbi Herzog and Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer; the *Talmudic Concordance*, a monumental work created single-handedly by Rabbi Hayyim Yehoshua Kossovsky; Rabbi Yosef Kapach's translation and re-editing of the writings of the Rambam and Saadia Gaon; Rabbi Menachem Kasher's *Torah Sheleimah*; the Steinsaltz Talmud; the Mishnah commentary by Rav Pinchas Kehati; the *Halakhah Pesukah* projects—these and other similar Torah enterprises have become part and parcel of rabbinic literature. They are a credit to the State of Israel.

Alongside these we can also list major collections of responsa that have become indispensable to Torah scholars: Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg's *Tzitz Eliezer*, *Mishpetei Uzziel* by Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uzziel, Rav Ovadiah Yosef's *Yabbia Omer*, and others.

At first glance, such a wealth of Torah literature should serve to contradict the claim that I made previously regarding the paucity of Torah literature. Those who grew up here are familiar with the enormous number of volumes published in Israel. The many journals that publish novellae in all areas of Torah study, the work of scholars and yeshivah students alike, are proof that the wellsprings of Torah creativity still retain their vitality. But this contradiction is, in fact, only superficial.

Shai Agnon once defined books in the following terms: "In the world of Torah, there are books, and there are books by authors. But doesn't every work have an author? What is the difference between a book, and a book by an author? The answer is this: a book (without attribution) is one that everyone needs; a book by an author, on the other hand, is one that the author himself needs."

These days, the vast majority of rabbinical works and volumes published by *yeshivot* fall into the category of “authors’ works”. Many of them will appear one day, yet quickly make way for new works. Only a few remain popular for somewhat longer, perhaps only among a limited readership, but none are of lasting value for future generations and for all students of Torah.

Why has the well gone dry? Why has creativity in the Torah world ceased? There are two possible answers to this question:

The easy answer is one that is offered by many. It is often given when the decline of the generations is discussed, with a sense of nostalgia for the spiritual giants of previous generations. The answer has to do with the fact that modernity has made us too comfortable. Those who give this answer say that the majority of great writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, created their most outstanding works under conditions of pressure and hardship. A life of comfort and luxuries blunts our creative powers.

Those who use this approach to explain the limited output of outstanding Torah works say: The fact that yeshivah students of today live comfortably, in comparison with the life of poverty faced by Torah scholars of past generations, is what has led to the “decline”. Those who hold this opinion can offer many examples of Torah scholars who acquired their knowledge under conditions of direst poverty. They support their view with quotations from the Sages, such as, “Treat the children of the poor with care—it is from among them that Torah will come forth,” or the statement in *Pirkei Avot*, “This is the way of Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation—but toil in the Torah! If you do this, ‘You are praiseworthy, and all is well with you.’”

But, as I have said, this is too simplistic an answer. For each of the examples and quotes brought to support the idea of spiritual creativity on the basis of a life of deprivation, one could offer many stories and references to major Torah figures whose greatness came to them because they did not have to concern themselves with the daily struggle to support themselves. Their spiritual creativity was a result of the fact that a life of comfort allowed them to broaden their horizons.

When Rabbi Meir Shapira established the greatest of the Polish *yeshivot*, *Yeshivat Hakhmei Lublin*, there were those who came to him to complain that the yeshivah’s building was too sumptuous. In particular, they complained that the comfortable living quarters for the students were not in line with the Mishnah quoted above (“This is the way of the Torah”). Rabbi Meir answered his critics: “You will note that the Mishnah does not have punctuation marks; as a result, you are misinterpreting it. You should really understand the Mishnah as raising a question: Is *this* the way of the Torah?”

Another way to try to understand the paucity of Torah scholarship in the yeshivah world of today is to examine the nature of the classical Torah works, and the circumstances under which they were written over the centuries.

To start with, we would like to state the following: the yeshivah world in Israel lacks some of the characteristics that marked the writing of Torah literature in past generations, particularly in terms of the breadth of the writers' horizons. In modern terms: intellectual curiosity.

The yeshivah world that once existed was, in many ways, sealed off from external influences, yet its leaders were well aware of the world that they faced and with which they had to cope. The yeshivah world in Israel, on the other hand, is not closed off from the material and political influences from the outside, yet it is, in many ways, ignorant of what is really going on in the society which it supposedly confronts. By being totally cut off from the pulse of Israeli life, it has set up for itself a sterile "bubble" of indifference.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Torah scholars of previous generations were constantly involved in the study and interpretation of halacha and spent their days in Torah institutions, they were still familiar with what was going on outside the walls of the *beit midrash* and were aware of the social and cultural trends developing in the outside world. Lithuanian rabbis and Roshei Yeshivah (although not their Chassidic counterparts), and even many of the students, had a thorough knowledge of the works of secular writers, particularly the works of contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish writers. (Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky, who headed the *Va'ad Hayeshivot* and *Yeshivat Slobodka* in Bnei Brak, and Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, the editor-in-chief of the Talmudic Encyclopedia, were able to quote by heart from the works of modern Hebrew literature, classical Russian literature, and the great works of world literature. Rabbi Herzog, the Chief Rabbi of Israel, was well versed in classical English literature, and even wrote articles on it.)

I once heard an interesting interpretation of this very point, from Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky, when I visited him in his home in Bayit Vegan soon after he settled permanently in Israel. Rabbi Abramsky told me the following: In this generation, perhaps more so than in previous generations, we have to work hard to ensure that yeshivah students, particularly those with ability, do not abandon the world of Torah. In previous generations, although a young Torah scholar might abandon the religious lifestyle, even after having studied in *yeshivot*, he would turn into a Bialik, or Achad Ha'Am, or Klatchkin and others like them. These days, when a yeshivah student leaves the Torah world for secular culture, nothing comes of him. Why? Because, in earlier generations, when yeshivah students were caught reading secular literature, what were they hiding on their *shtenders*, their

reading stands, under the *gemara*? Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky! But, these days, what do they hide under the *gemara*? Ma'ariv, Yediot Acharonot, Haolam Hazeh, and Hamodia [Israeli newspapers]. If, heaven forbid, they leave the world of Torah, what will become of them?

The great works of rabbinic literature on the Talmud (as opposed to Bible commentaries, Midrashic literature, liturgical works and kabbalistic material) can be divided into four main classes. The first is made up of *hid-dushim* (novellae) on the Torah and works that describe new approaches and methodologies in Torah study. The main purpose of such literature is to maintain the vitality of Torah study. This type of literature opens up new directions in Torah study and interpretation. It is characterized by novellae that either contain some brilliant or original approach to complex Talmudic discussions, or resolve contradictions and differences of opinion between the various talmudic commentators.

Examples of this type of development can be found in the works of Rabbi Hayyim Soloveitchik of Brisk (the “Brisker” or analytical method) and Rabbi Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, the Hazon Ish (the “breadth and depth” approach).

The logical method introduced by Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk, is based on analysis of each Talmudic passage, with the aim of understanding its simple or direct meaning, the *peshat*. This approach favors in-depth study over study that encompasses a broad range of materials. It was revolutionary in its time and breathed new life into the yeshivah world.

Prior to the inception of the “Brisker” method, the most commonly used method of study used in the *yeshivot* of Poland, Russia and Lithuania was based on the *Pitpul* or *Hillukim* method. This was an approach devised by Rabbi Yaakov Pollack, who was one of the great Torah scholars in Southern Germany in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and who became the first Rosh Yeshivah and Torah educator in Poland. This approach, designed to sharpen the students’ intellect, assumes that the various Talmudic sources and statements of the Rabbis must form a harmonious whole. That being the case, any contradictions between sources and texts are only imaginary and thus they can be resolved by applying the intellect.

The second class of Talmudic literature is the Responsa literature, which is a continuation of the path of halachic decision making that began in the time of the Mishnah itself.

The Responsa literature deals with the halacha as it developed over the ages by adding newer layers of decisions to halachot that had already been determined, by identifying sources that would allow the resolution of halachic questions that had remained unanswered up till then, and by providing decisions on new questions that arise in response to changing times.

The responsa literature was first put into written form by the Geonim, who established a norm of providing written responses to questions put to them on halacha and custom. This is the largest class of rabbinic writings, both in terms of the number of volumes—over three thousand—and in terms of the number of individual responsa—over three hundred thousand.

What makes this class of Jewish literature special is that it is a response to changing times, and thus can be seen as measuring the pulse of Jewish communities. Major Responsa works dealing with contemporary issues include: *Iggrot Moshe*, by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Meshiv Milchama* by Rav Shlomo Goren, *Tzitz Eliezer* by Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, *Minchat Yitzhak* by Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak Weiss, *Seridei Esh* by Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, and others.

The third class of Talmudic literature is the enormous wealth of rabbinic literature that codifies and systematizes what is generally called the “Oral Torah”—so called because, in principle, it ought not be put in written form, but only transmitted orally. However, because of its scope, the Oral Law had become an almost sealed book to the majority of Jews, and so it had to be collected, edited, translated and explained anew. The beginnings of this class can be found in the editing and publication of the Mishnah and Talmud. It continued with the codifications by Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (the Rif), the Rambam and Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the *Shulhan Arukh*. In more recent times, with the *Pahad Yitzhak* of Rabbi Yitzhak Lampronti, the *Sdeh Hemed* of Rabbi Hizkiya Medini, and the *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, edited by the late Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin.

A particularly important subclass is made up of those texts that serve as an aid to Talmud study, such as various indices to the works of the rabbis. Outstanding among such works in our own time is Rabbi Hayyim Yehoshua Kossovsky’s monumental concordance, *Otzar Leshon HaMishnah VebaTalmud*.

The fourth class within rabbinic literature is that of newly discovered and published works taken from the various *genizah* sources—manuscripts and early printed works—that for years had been hidden in libraries and museums, sometimes only in fragmentary form. But, in recent decades, they have been transcribed, translated, interpreted and published.

In all four of these classes of Talmudic literature, the contribution of the Israeli *yeshivot* is minimal. Their closed approach has shut them off from the creativity of the world of Torah literature and development.



When was the first yeshivah established? Who were the first *Roshei Yeshivah*? Who were the first yeshivah students? Tradition has it that the first yeshivah was established immediately after the Flood, when Noah and his sons left the Ark. The first *Roshei Yeshivah* were Shem and Ever, the descendants of Noah. The first students in that yeshivah were the forefathers of the Jewish people: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

According to the Talmudic *aggada*—the vehicle by which the philosophy of the Sages was expressed—the Torah was already in existence prior to the creation of the world. As the Midrash *Tanhuma* expresses it, “God consulted the Torah, and created the world.”

According to the Sages, the world cannot exist without Torah. For the world’s existence to continue, there has to be constant Torah study, and it is the students of Torah who guarantee the continued existence of the world.

From the time of Abraham, the first Hebrew and the founder and progenitor of the Israelite people, Torah study in yeshivah frameworks has taken place constantly: “From the days of our forefathers, formal Torah study has been an integral part of their lives. When they were in Egypt, they had *yeshivot*; when they were in the wilderness, they had *yeshivot*. Abraham grew old, but continued to study in yeshivah; so too did Isaac and Jacob, and so too Eliezer, Abraham’s servant” (*Talmud Bavli, Yoma 28b*). Our forefathers’ study of Torah in their *yeshivot* was a kind of prologue to the Revelation at Sinai, when the Torah was given to the Jewish people as its Constitution.

Through their homiletic comments, the Sages tried to express the centrality of the yeshivah framework in the life of the Jewish people. It is this framework that, for over two thousand years, has been the source of the Jewish people’s creative spark.



Since Rabbi Hayyim, a student of the Vilna *Gaon*, established the first Lithuanian yeshivah in the town of Volozhin, about a hundred and fifty years ago, the term “yeshivah” has become synonymous with the Lithuanian style of yeshivah, which became the prototype for such institutions among Ashkenazi Jews. As time passed, it even influenced the *yeshivot* of the Sephardi world, particularly those in Israel and in North Africa.

Throughout the Jewish Diaspora—both in the East and in the West, among both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jewry—there were important *yeshivot* and institutions of Torah study. But, from its beginnings, it was the

Lithuanian yeshivah that was referred to in the expression “the Yeshivah World.” Today, the term “yeshivah” refers to one whose program derives from the Lithuanian mold. All other *yeshivot* are described by appending an adjective to the name, or by using some alternative term: Chassidic yeshivah, Hesder yeshivah, Midrasha, Torah Institute, Institute for Rabbinic Training, and so on.

Many changes took place in the past century, in the world in general, and within the Jewish world in particular: the rift between the world of Torah and the *yeshivot*, on the one hand, and the forces of the Enlightenment, on the other hand, that sought to undermine them; the Bolshevik Revolution on the one hand, and the Jewish national revival on the other; the changes in Jewish society in Eastern Europe between the two world wars. All of these led to dramatic, far-reaching changes in the lives of the Jews. Indeed, the old Jewish world was destroyed and was no longer. In the world that arose in its place, Torah sages lost their central role as leaders of the people, and the *yeshivot* were no longer the focus of Jewish life.

Until this period of cultural and social change in Jewish life in Eastern Europe, yeshivah study was limited to an intellectual, scholarly elite. But the changes and revolutions taking place, forced the *yeshivot* from place to place, often from one country to another. Moreover, the *yeshivot* had to expand and take in larger numbers of students, so that they could withstand the winds of change that threatened them, both from within and outside the Jewish world.

Between the two world wars, the Torah scholars in Eastern Europe felt that they had to go outside the confines of their institutions, and make an enormous effort to strengthen the existing *yeshivot*, and establish new ones. This was a period of growth within the yeshivah world in general, and among the Lithuanian *yeshivot* in particular. It was during this period that the Lithuanian *yeshivot* expanded, not only within Poland and Lithuania, but also overseas, to the United States and England, and particularly to Eretz Yisrael. *Roshei Yeshivah* and hand-picked students from the Lithuanian *yeshivot* immigrated to what was then Palestine, and established *yeshivot* in the Lithuanian style. These included *Yeshivat Knesset Yisrael-Slobodka* in Hebron, and *Yeshivat Lomza* in Petach Tikva.

The Lithuanian *yeshivot*, which had been forced to relinquish their central role in the life of the Jewish people, soon adapted to their new status. The yeshivah was transformed from the “cradle of the nation’s spirit,” as Bialik described it, to an incubator for outstanding Torah scholars, a publishing house for major Torah writings, a training school for rabbis, rabbinic judges and other religious functionaries, and a study center for laymen who combined scholarship with a worldly occupation.

The Lithuanian *yeshivot* saw the encouragement of Torah scholars as one of their central goals. They encouraged the production of original works of scholarship, and urged both students and teachers to publish new ideas in Torah. In those days, when not everyone could afford the costs of publishing, the major *yeshivot* issued regular journals containing *chiddushim* by their students, with the aim of training the young scholars to produce a quality intellectual product.

The extent to which publication of works of Torah scholarship was important can be seen from a prayer composed by the *Hafetz Hayyim*, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen, who headed the *yeshivah* in Radin:

“Master of the Universe: See the honor which Your people, Israel, have given You; see the crowns with which they have adorned Your Torah. You granted Israel a small Torah, but see the giant towers that they have built upon it. They have studied each and every word, omitting not a single hairsbreadth. They have beautified and decorated all of it. Every letter, even the crowns on the letters, have they explained. They have illuminated all of it, like precious pearls and sapphires. Behold the two Talmuds, *Bavli* and *Yerushalmi*, the *Zohar*, *Sifra* and *Sifri*, *Mekhilta* and *Tosefta*, *Rabbenu Alfasi*, *Rambam*, *Rishonim* and *Aharonim*, innumerable! And under what conditions did they create all of these? In bitter Exile, under the most terrible, unbearable conditions. They studied and wrote even though they were caught between the sword and the fire. Master of the Universe, can You be angry with them? Have You another nation that can be compared to them? Has someone else proved themselves thus? Father, how long will You leave Your people exiled and afflicted in foreign countries? Let them study Your Torah and serve You in peace, and see what novellae on the Torah they will offer before You, as thank-offerings and peace-offerings.”

Undoubtedly, the *Hafetz Hayyim*, who had enriched the Jewish world with his monumental work, the *Mishnah Berurah*, and other halachic and ethical works, expressed, through this prayer, the attitude of the Lithuanian *yeshivot* toward such original works of scholarship that would acquire a permanent place in Jewish life.



There is a Midrash: “The sword and the book came down from heaven, intertwined”. The two worlds into which young Jewish men are drawn—that of thought and that of action—have grown in parallel since the inception of the State of Israel. While Israel’s young generation of fighters and commanders has developed a fighting model that is studied by armies throughout the world, it is in the world of the book—original works of

Torah scholarship—that the wellsprings have run dry. There are few significant works of quality by those who grew up in the *yeshivot* in the State of Israel, certainly in comparison to the major Torah works produced in earlier generations. The voice of Torah has not been stilled, but the creation of new “tunes” has ceased.



Indeed, this analysis relates primarily to the state of creativity in field of Torah literature. However, inferences may be drawn from this regarding the state of creativity in Torah literature in the lands of the Diaspora as well. Like the world in which we live, the world of the *yeshivot* is now a “global village”. The *yeshivot* in America are influenced by the Israeli *yeshivot* of the Lithuanian tradition and by the atmosphere of the B’nei Brak style “*humrot*” as well as by “*gedolei hador*” (as they are called in the yeshivah world) who are cut off, for ideological reasons, from the wider intellectual and cultural world.

Unfortunately, we do not have *gedolei Torah* today in the Jewish world like Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenitzky, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the Lubavitcher Rebbe and Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, just as in Israel there are no longer Torah personalities like Rabbi Yehezkel Abramsky, Rabbi Yitzchak Issac Herzog, Rabbi Benzion Meir Uziel, Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, and others, who in addition to being *gedolei Torah* immersed in the *dalet amot* of the world of halakha and Torah, were broad-minded men who did not view general studies as a catastrophe that would be the ruin of the world of Torah and Judaism. They did not refrain from general and academic studies nor did they prevent their descendants from engaging in such studies, even though they considered a yeshivah education in a Lithuanian yeshivah that did not include general studies to be the pinnacle of Torah education. Yet, Torah institutions in America were established, as well as the rabbinical seminaries, all of which, unlike the traditional Lithuanian *yeshivot*, adopted the approach of “*torah im derekh erez*” of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, their goal being to provide the Jewish people with a generation of *talmidei hakhamim* who were also broad-minded intellectuals with extensive educations. What is called Modern Orthodoxy was created from these institutions, making available to the Jewish people an enlightened rabbinate that we are so in need of today in order to deal with the catastrophe of assimilation that is the result of modernism throughout the world in general, and more specifically, is due to the changing Jewish world.