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PASTORAL COUNSELING AT YCT RABBINICAL SCHOOL

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“Rabbi, this is hard to talk about but . . .

. . . I want to be more observant but my husband thinks that going to the *mikvah* is primitive.

. . . our daughter wants to bring her non-Jewish “friend” home for Pesah . . .

. . . my father had a stroke and is on life support. He told me he never wanted to live hooked up to machines.”

From the moment young men announce their intention to study for the rabbinate, they are bombarded with questions regarding the most intimate and far-reaching aspects of life. Congregants, friends and complete strangers bestow trust, confidence and enormous responsibility on rabbis by asking their help with navigating difficult religious and personal situations. The observant Jewish community should be grateful for this phenomenon—we know that our *mesorah* has guided the generations before us and we hope, in this increasingly complex era, that Jews turn to traditional sources of wisdom for counsel.

The best community rabbis have always been those who could transition from intellectual scholarship to practical wisdom in real time and with real people. Steeped in Halakhic learning, such rabbis influenced Jewish life not only by answering the specifics of questions posed, but by reaching beyond the manifest *she'eilot*, and going to the emotional and psychological core of questions. The pastoral training of yesteryear was accomplished informally through mentorship and example, but mostly it was left to the individual talents of the rabbi to figure things out for himself.

Today's rabbinate faces the challenges of an increasingly porous and diverse society. While rigorous classical education in *halakhah* is essential the recent fields of psychology and professional counseling can also inform contemporary rabbinic training. Preparing our future rabbis for their work as pastoral counselors is best accomplished when it is not left to osmosis. Rabbinic preparation should include training in specific counseling methods as well as the fostering of sensitivity and awareness regarding the impact of the rabbinate on the rabbi's personal life.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah is unique among rabbinical schools in making pastoral counseling a mandatory course of study throughout all four years of its program. The program rests on a three-part foundation:

- 1) Didactic instruction in the classroom
- 2) Practical experience in hospitals and rabbinic internships
- 3) Individual awareness through special group work and supervision.

Our goal is to prepare our graduate-rabbis to listen with rigor and compassion, to know what questions need to be asked in order to learn the basic diagnostic information needed in any situation, to tactfully ask those questions, assess the situation and, finally, to either resolve the issue or refer the congregant appropriately to a more expert resource. Throughout, we emphasize the sensitivity of the pastoral counseling encounter. Divulging personal matters evokes powerful emotions on both sides. Rabbis need to chaperone the vulnerability and stigma congregants may experience, while remaining aware of feelings and issues touched off within themselves. Finally, they must monitor the boundaries between themselves and their congregants.

The didactic component of YCT's pastoral counseling program begins with a weekly skill-building course in the first year. Through classroom instruction, reading assignments, and role-play, students learn interview technique. The students explore challenges inherent in the rabbinic encounter—specifically, how to meld the role of compassionate, non-judgmental listener with that of Halakhic Authority. The course goes on to introduce classic signs and symptoms of psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression, which rabbis are likely to encounter in their communities. Also covered are highly emotional personal and communal situations that rabbis more uniquely experience, such as the psychology of *ba'alei teshuvah* and converts, and the impact of trauma and catastrophe on religious people's lives.

The second year didactic curriculum is devoted to two pastoral areas that rabbis frequently deal with: *bikur holim* and family (including marital) counseling. All of our students rotate through an intensive chaplaincy course run by the Jewish Health Care Chaplaincy of New York. These hours are divided between classroom instruction and hospital visits. Group sessions provide a forum for students to discuss and process the powerful experiences evoked sitting by the bedsides of ill and dying patients

The third year program aims to blend counseling and practical *halakhah* around a lifecycle curriculum. Starting with birth and early childhood, topics such as the psychology of parenthood are woven together with rabbinic responsibilities such as *berit milah*, or a family's wish to create a *simhat bat* for their new daughter. We consider issues such as the impact of having a disabled son or daughter, the spiritual life of young children and religious issues of childcare. Topics including dating, courtship and relationship navigation occupy several class hours and pre-marital counseling is a strong priority. We expect that prior to serving as a *mesader kiddushin* at a wedding, a YCT rabbi has spent several

sessions with the couple helping them to prepare for marriage.

The complexities of homosexuality are also explored, as are the situation of older singles. We spend time looking at relationship challenges such as infertility, adoption, addiction disorders, domestic violence, and infidelity. Finally, our third year students examine aging, end-of-life issues and the involvement of caregivers in the final part of the lifecycle. While not all areas can be covered, the goal is to give the students a basic comfort in the halakhic parameters and broad psychological issues of major practical topics.

By the fourth year, students are looking toward their future pulpits. Third- and fourth year students travel to affiliate synagogues where they work under the mentorship of community rabbis. Each student is also assigned a supervisor with whom he meets several times per semester to discuss the problems and nuances of pastoral counseling situations that occur during his internship. The curriculum for the last year of the formal pastoral counseling program is organized around a master class model. Each soon-to-be rabbi prepares a clinical case presentation culled from his internship. In the presence of the entire student body, he presents his case to an invited master teacher—one of a pool of guest experts in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and rabbinic counseling. The master teacher delves into the case, highlighting and exploring the specifics of the situation.

In addition to classroom and supervision time, YCT incorporates a unique forum for personal development—the process group. One of the most difficult challenges for rabbis is the loneliness of the profession. In order to be effective, rabbis need to be simultaneously available, charismatic and slightly separate from their *ba'alei batim*. Negotiating the challenges created by these needs requires preparation. We believe that the process group experience helps our students encounter these issues individually while also strengthening the bonds of trust and support between their fellow students. Every week, each student class meets with a process group leader, a mental health professional who makes a commitment to work with that group for their entire four years at YCT. Discussions of the process group are entirely confidential between leaders and students. They may explore personal, academic, religious or any other issues that they choose. Process group is a template for life outside the yeshiva. Undoubtedly, tension and confrontation between group members occurs. The students need to learn how to mediate moments of crisis in the process group and how to live with conflicts that cannot be resolved. These skills will serve them well in their future work as community rabbis.

Based on the enthusiasm that the rabbinical students have for their process groups, we have instituted a monthly support group for spouses. YCT realizes that the role of *rebbetzin* is a complex one. Women come from varied personal and professional backgrounds and anticipate different degrees of engagement in their husbands' professional lives. The support group, facilitated by a *rebbetzin* who is also a social worker, allows exploration of these issues and provides

opportunities for students' wives to talk with other *rebbetzins* who come to New York specifically for group meetings.

The success of all of these programs depends on the availability of expert faculty. YCT is fortunate to draw upon the resources of many clinicians in New York City who are committed to training rabbis who will be sensitive to the complex needs of today's congregants. Our pastoral counseling teachers recognize that clergy are often first responders, the initial contacts for people in distress. The competence and comfort of rabbis in these tense, demanding situations can determine spiritual and practical outcomes for many individuals and families.

Building a comprehensive pastoral counseling program requires commitment of precious academic time and financial resources. Even more, it calls for flexibility and tolerance. Today's Jewish world desperately needs learned rabbis who can reach *kehillot* through involvement in the day-to-day challenges of living. Pastoral counseling is thus a building block in the foundation of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. We hope that sharing our program will inform and enrich *semikhab* preparation elsewhere.