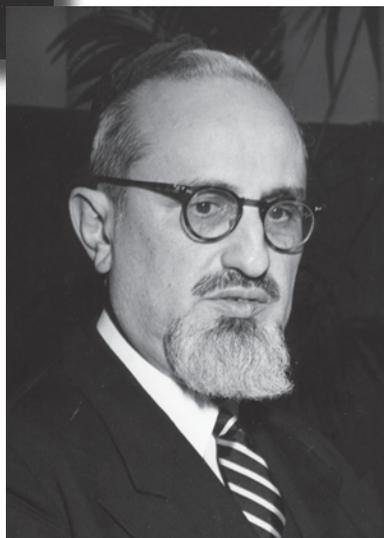


Shelley R. Safir, first dean of Yeshiva College
(Courtesy Yeshiva University Archives)



*Bernard Revel, president of
RIETS and Yeshiva College*
(Courtesy American Jewish
Archives)



*Joseph B. Soloveitchik, rosh yeshiva of
RIETS and professor of Talmud*
(Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

Freedom and Responsibility: The First Orthodox College Journalists and Early Yeshiva College Politics, 1935–1941

Zev Eleff

In a speech delivered before the Alpha of Massachusetts, at Harvard University, Dr. Woodrow Wilson, then-president of Princeton University, spoke about the state of the American college. The future United States president lamented that “the college has lost its definiteness of aim” and has “for so long a time affected to be too modest to assert its authority over its pupils.” Wilson therefore called for universities to reestablish themselves as communities of teachers and pupils and for administrators to cease from devoting too much energy to the business of running colleges. Further, in urging teachers to reacquaint students to the “spiritual side” of books and intellectualism, Wilson noted that it is the sense of community that students required most:

The real intellectual life of a body of undergraduates, if there be any, manifests itself, not in the class-room, but in what they do and talk of and set before themselves as their favorite objects between classes and lectures. You will see the true life of a college in the evenings, at the dinner-table or beside the fire in the groups that gather and the men that go off eagerly to their work, where youths get together and let themselves go upon their favorite themes,—in the effect their studies have upon them when no compulsion of any kind is on them and they are not thinking to be called to a reckoning of what they know.¹

President Wilson’s words rang just as true for the 1930s and in today’s time as they did when they were spoken on 1 July 1909. It is difficult—if not impossible—to gauge the progress of a group of young adults by the courses in which they enrolled. For that reason, when Paula S. Fass in 1977 wrote her path-breaking study on American youth in the twenties, she relied heavily on meticulous research of hundreds of articles and editorials published in more than a dozen campus newspapers to inform her work.²

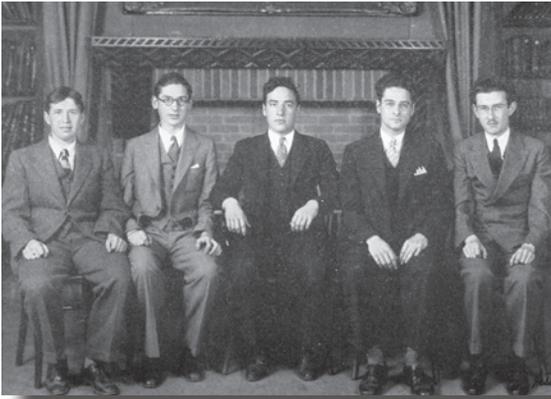
Certainly, if we need close analysis of the college press to evaluate campus culture at the secular university, then it is most certainly essential to examine the unique student experience at Yeshiva College. Founded in 1928, Yeshiva College was the third component of a Yeshiva community that included the Talmudical Academy high school; Yeshiva College; and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). (For the purpose of this article, the term “Yeshiva” will refer to the institution in its entirety, while “Yeshiva College” refers to the undergraduate college only.)

Yeshiva was the vehicle driving Dr. Bernard Revel's vision to modernize Orthodox education in America. The effort began in 1915, when he was elected president of RIETS, the earliest Orthodox rabbinical seminary founded in the United States. Plagued by severe financial constraints since its founding in 1896, RIETS had become more or less fiscally solvent when it merged with Yeshivat Etz Chaim, a school for younger Orthodox students, three years before Revel's appointment. Upon arrival, Revel made courses in Jewish history and philology available to his rabbinical students and introduced homiletics and other practical training classes to better prepare future Orthodox clergy for life in the contemporary rabbinical frontier. Still, the lion's share of RIETS's schedule appeared as something like the old school European yeshivot.

Revel's second step in modernizing Orthodox education was to establish the Talmudical Academy in 1916, with the thought that he might dissuade Orthodox families from enrolling their children in public high schools. As it was described in the school's register, the Talmudical Academy was first and foremost a school "in which the regular high school studies as prescribed by the Board of Education of the City of New York" would be taught.³

Yet, while the theological seminary and the high school were certainly billed as modern institutions that perpetuated American ideals and democratic mores, it was singularly Yeshiva College that Revel established to synthesize religious and secular studies. Revel's hope was that his college could "bridge the chasm between intellectualism and faith." With this as its primary purpose, Yeshiva College was to serve as a theological laboratory whose most important contribution to American Orthodox life was "develop[ing] a complete Jewish personality." Furthermore, Revel's goal—the "blending of the Jewish approach to life with that pointed by modern culture," of cohesion and conflict between religion and science—would not stand in the way of students' simultaneously receiving a thorough education in "Talmud and Codes" and an undergraduate education on par with other institutions of higher learning.⁴

It is difficult to evaluate whether Revel's vision for Yeshiva College was realized. With the exception of a few offerings in Jewish history and philosophy, nothing in the college's course catalogues suggest that its science and liberal arts classes were any different from the ones at other colleges. However, life outside the classroom, particularly extracurricular life, reveals the ideological struggle of a new generation of American Orthodox Jews determined to wrestle with the European traditionalism of their parents and grandparents and the American culture steeped in modernism. Placed into these terms, we find a group of students determined to test the limits of Orthodox Judaism's engagement with modernity, long before Jewish sociologists were writing on so-called modern Orthodoxy. That challenge, to create a culture synthesized from traditional Judaism and liberal American life, was the daunting struggle of the first genera-



The founding governing board of The Commentator. Left to right: William Kaufman, Mordecai Gabriel, Moses I. Feuerstein, Seymour Kornfeld and Gershon Feigon. (Courtesy Masmid (1935): 57)

enrolled in RIETS. These students were poring over talmudic tracts and rabbinic texts while they were simultaneously taking courses at Yeshiva College. In all likelihood, they had to brace themselves before stepping out of their dormitory rooms the day after going to press, as they would invariably face the scrutiny of suspicious classmates, deans, and *roshei yeshiva* (rabbinic heads of school). Indeed, these same journalists who valued freedom of the press were still, to borrow from Irving Howe, “in some deep sense, part of Europe.” They faced numerous situations when they were torn between reporting the news and censoring information that could fall under the halakhic strictures of *lashon hara*, slanderous speech. Over the years, *The Commentator* took firm stands on various issues. Yet, the editors did so while cognizant that their role within their college was unlike that at City College, Columbia, or any of the other secular colleges along the East Coast that their siblings, cousins, and friends attended.⁵

The newspaper’s content reflected this difference. Over the course of its first decade of publication, Zionism was far and away the most talked-about issue facing American Jews, as well as the most recurrent theme in the student newspaper. Stories chronicled the events leading to the establishment of Israel and editorials encouraged greater support from American Jewry. Discussions on the situation in Palestine began with the newspaper’s first issue. There, the inaugural governing board ran an editorial titled, “How Long Will Orthodoxy Slumber,” blasting Orthodox organizations for being less involved in fundraising for the Histadrut than their Conservative and Reform counterparts. “It is a fact,” the piece claimed, “that there are in Palestine today organized groups which, while insisting on the establishment of an enlightened social order on which our friends in the Reform and Conservative Camps place so much

tion of student journalists who wrote and edited the school’s student newspaper, *The Commentator*.

Yeshiva College students undoubtedly found it difficult to be freewheeling journalists in a small, close-knit Orthodox Jewish community. Except for a few years at the start of the fifties, virtually all *Commentator* editors-in-chief, from its beginning in 1935 until 1958, were

emphasis, draw their inspiration from and remain steadfast to the principles of Orthodox Judaism.”⁶

By the spring semester of 1943, coverage of Zionism and Palestine had appeared on *The Commentator*'s front page twenty-one times and in fifteen of its editorials. However, beginning on 4 March 1943, with a six-page special issue on the Nazi attempt to exterminate European Jewry, the editors turned their attention toward Europe and the Holocaust. The front page of the edition featured a drawing of a grotesque, blackened hand reaching out of a pool of blood. The only text on page one was a caption below the disturbing image. Quoting from Psalms, the caption read: “Out of the Depths Have I Cried Unto Thee, O Lord!” The edition, described as an “initial attempt” to spread the word, included stories about Jews being loaded into freight cars and referred to several Nazi officers, such as Heinrich Himmler.⁷

Before the 1943 issue, little was mentioned of European Jewry's dismal situation. In fact, before Kristallnacht, which occurred on 9–10 November 1938, *The Commentator* printed just one editorial alerting readers of the Nazis' imminent terror. The journalists were so ignorant of the Nazi brutality overseas that the annual spoof edition, published at Purim, in March 1942, contained the headline: “Adolph Hitler Was Once Teacher Here.” Regrettably, the fictitious article reported that, “Proud of the distinction of having had this great historical figure as an inhabitant within its portals, Yeshiva will erect a monument to commemorate the occasion.”⁸

News stories such as these went unchallenged by Yeshiva College administrators, students, and alumni. In all probability, members of the Yeshiva community either agreed with the opinions in *The Commentator*, were just as ignorant as its writers, or were not disturbed by them to the point that they submitted letters to the editor. Yet, there were occasions, especially in the newspaper's earliest years, when the journalists clashed with their heads of school. *The Commentator* editors sometimes felt obligated to report the news despite the tensions that would come to bear. After all, the editors reasoned, their fearless style of journalism was “in line with the powerful undergraduate movement spreading throughout the colleges in America today.” We might conclude that the student journalists preferred to associate themselves with other campus papers rather than the Jewish press.⁹

Over time, many of the tensions that the Yeshiva College journalists encountered would become front-page headlines and the subject of dozens of editorials. Sometimes, either explicitly or implicitly, deans bordered on censorship when they communicated to the editors their expectations of what they felt was appropriate and newsworthy. The journalists held steadfastly to their positions often, committed to the belief that democratic notions of free speech and freedom of the press were fundamental to developing a modern Jewish college in America. Thus, *The Commentator* began to assume the role of defender

of Yeshiva College's core principles. The editors refused to concede that their Orthodox brand of Judaism and the free college press, a hallmark of collegiate culture, could not be somehow harmonized. This, then—the struggle for freedom of the press mixed with the responsibility to keep within the patriarchal standards of a traditional world—is the story we seek to explore.

A Small-Time Newspaper with Big-Time Dreams

The first Yeshiva College graduates made up a small yet diverse group of young men. In the college's first dozen years, nearly half of its some five hundred students were alumni of the Talmudical Academy. Another 20 percent of the students were drawn to Washington Heights from other yeshivot in the United States and Europe, while the remaining one-third received their secondary education in public schools. Yeshiva College catered to various profiles and interests despite the fact that by the mid-thirties, about two out of five students hailed from Brooklyn's Jewish community. Students were attracted to the new school for a variety of reasons. Some were committed to the curriculum, which stressed the importance of merging Jewish and secular studies into one synthesized educational model, while another, more pragmatic, group acknowledged the need to obtain a college degree to eventually earn a living. Yeshiva College, this latter cluster of students thought, was the culturally safest place to pursue that goal. Another significant cohort with Zionist leanings enrolled in Yeshiva's Teachers Institute, a program started in 1917 by Mizrahi leaders where students studied modern Hebrew literature. Still others who fancied themselves iconoclasts sought for the first time to engage in an advanced secular education, despite the harsh warnings from their outspoken European rabbis.¹⁰

Certainly, during the Great Depression, academic opportunities were limited for Yeshiva College students. America's economic collapse was so devastating that in 1930, just two years after opening its doors, administrators considered not introducing a junior year of study. Notwithstanding these hardships, dedicated faculty and students did their best to create a college campus atmosphere, replete with voluntary lecture series and extracurricular programs.¹¹

The long-lasting *Masmid* yearbook, established in 1929, was the first supplementary school activity at Yeshiva College. Next was the formation of a student government. For many years RIETS had boasted an active student council, the Student Organization of Yeshiva, and in 1930 the college formed its own student board, the Yeshiva College Executive Council, which was reorganized two years later as the Yeshiva College Student Council. In 1934, the student activities committee, under the aegis of student council, started a basketball team, chess club, glee club, and debating society. Another group that got off the ground with immediate success was the international relations club. Established in December 1933, the club met bimonthly to discuss domestic and foreign political issues. After its first year of operation, the political group grew from fifteen founding participants to thirty-three student members.¹²

The early momentum to develop campus life reached its peak in 1935, when a very active student leadership formed nearly a dozen athletic teams and clubs. The list of new student groups included the Mizrahi Youth, Ibn Ezra Math Club, and Maimonides Health Club, as well as a student cooperative store and tennis and softball teams. In addition, the student loan fund and the employment bureau were set up to help students with their expenses and to find part-time jobs, respectively. Yet, the most impressive addition to the growing number of extracurricular activities at Yeshiva College that year was the establishment of its student newspaper, *The Commentator*.¹³

Although *The Commentator* was the first and longest-running Yeshiva student newspaper, its origins lie sometime before its first issue was published on 1 March 1935. By the thirties, the Talmudical Academy, founded in 1916, was already an established high school with many extracurricular activities monitored by the General Organization, the school's student board. Among these early programs were several modest attempts to start a news publication. In 1920, the General Organization printed the *Yeshiva News*, a news bulletin that also contained editorial content. The *Yeshiva News* was given a certain degree of editorial freedom, but the publication quickly collapsed for lack of student support. In 1934, Talmudical Academy students established the *Academy News*, but like its predecessor, it too suffered from lack of student involvement.

Although journalistic activities in the high school certainly contributed to Yeshiva College students' interest in starting their own newspaper, *The Commentator*'s beginnings were mostly inspired by two factors: the ambitions of a student who would become a longtime Yeshiva College professor, Eli Levine, and another student publication, *Hedenu*, a student-run magazine.¹⁴

Levine, who emigrated from Pesotzna, Russia, in 1923, was one of the more motivated members of Yeshiva College's first graduating class of twenty students, in 1932. Although a chemistry major, Levine displayed his keen literary abilities by involving himself in several publications during the earliest years of the college. As an upperclassman, he was an editor of the *Masmid* and served on the literary staff of the ninth volume of *Hedenu*, the latter activity absorbing the lion's share of his extracurricular hours.¹⁵

For nearly two decades, undergraduates and rabbinical students at RIETS wrote and edited the pages of *Hedenu*. The publication was a modest journal that ran at inconsistent intervals and included a hodgepodge of Hebrew and English Torah-related articles as well as book reviews, editorials, and news briefs. Among its notable news stories, it published articles in 1928 on Rabbi Shimon Shkop's twice-weekly lectures, and in 1929 it devoted space to the development of RIETS's Student Organization of Yeshiva. More dedicated to providing Yeshiva news than ever before, Levine's 1932 volume of *Hedenu* carried an official news section that reported on several Yeshiva news items, including the appointment of Rabbi Joseph Lookstein to the RIETS homiletics

staff. Indeed, *Hedenu* under Levine's leadership endeavored to become a true Yeshiva news journal.¹⁶

Levine and the other forerunners of Yeshiva College journalism were in sync with the general collegiate spirit of their time. By the 1930s, if a Yeshiva College student picked up a nearby Manhattan undergraduate newspaper, he might read headlines in City College's *Campus* or Columbia's *Spectator* calling for an end to administrative oversight and faculty censors. Collegians across the country had heard about how frustrated students had raised funds to start news publications, such as the *Saturday Evening Post* at Yale and *Tempest* at Michigan, to avoid the faculty censors imposed on the already-established campus newspapers. The first students at Yeshiva College understood that, due to the strictures of their religious observance, their social climate differed from the kind felt on secular campuses. Nevertheless, the Yeshiva College students were well acquainted with rebellious college life from stories their older brothers and sisters relayed—and, quite possibly, they were envious.¹⁷

Following rigorous Talmud study and college courses, Levine and his small band of editors dedicated what was left of their college day to serving as Yeshiva's resident "rebels." Despite a considerable dearth of manpower, the 1932 *Hedenu* was sharper than previous volumes, as it repeatedly sought to challenge the administration by printing editorials on the weaknesses of the Yeshiva College curriculum and the poor upkeep of the school building. However, after Levine and his first Yeshiva College class had graduated, *Hedenu* struggled for a mission statement and, in fact, for its very existence. The publication unsuccessfully scrounged to find interesting news items and failed to print many issues. Sensing a need for an about-face, *Hedenu*'s 1934 editorial board tried to reclaim its journal's identity through a bold editorial. Titled, "*Hedenu*—A New Policy," the editorial declared:

It is our belief that now, for the first time, *Hedenu* sees the light of the day in its true garb, no longer clad in the unbecoming clothes of a student gossip paper given to petty quibbles and foolish dilly-dallyings.¹⁸

All news reporting, it vowed, would be stripped from *Hedenu*'s pages. In its place, the editorial board filled its 1934 issues with Judaica, headlined by reprints of articles by Dr. Albert Einstein and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a recent immigrant to Boston.

Hedenu's new editorial direction, which would last until the magazine ceased publication at the beginning of the 1940s, could not have sat well with Eli Levine or the journal's sophomore business manager, Moses I. Feuerstein. A Boston boy born into one of the most affluent Orthodox families in the United States, Feuerstein came to Yeshiva College with the brains and the connections to change the campus culture. And, after completing a graduate degree in chemistry at Columbia University, Levine returned to Yeshiva College as an

assistant lab instructor, anxious to help the college increase its student body and resources so that it might support a newspaper. Therefore, it must have been somewhere in the corridors of Yeshiva's main school building where Levine put the bug into Feuerstein's head to use his strong connections to Yeshiva's central administration and petition for a student-run newspaper.¹⁹

For Feuerstein, who was destined for a distinguished career in Jewish politics as president of the Orthodox Union and chairman of Torah Umesorah (National Society for Hebrew Day Schools), the dream of forming a student newspaper began in the spring semester of 1934. At the time, "for fear of laughter," he only mentioned the idea to his closest friends. The following semester David Petegorsky, student council president, appointed Feuerstein, a junior at that time, to head a publication committee "to investigate and to report on the possibility of financing the publication and on plans for its establishment." Feuerstein's group reported its progress to student council at every one of its fall 1934 meetings. Plans were soon put into place for a biweekly publication of a four-page Yeshiva College student newspaper. Not surprising, student council quickly appointed Feuerstein to serve as *The Commentator's* editor-in-chief. Yet, despite the frenzied pace, plans for a late fall launch were briefly postponed so that Feuerstein could piece together his governing board and secure advertisement.²⁰

Monitoring his apprentice's work with great pride, Levine saw his vision for a more "newsy" *Hedenu* transplanted in Feuerstein's budding success. Here is a letter to the editor written by Levine in the first edition of *The Commentator*, published 1 March 1935:

In our days of the beginnings of Yeshiva College we, too, had fond hopes of making ours a true College, with a fine variety of extra-curricular activities, clubs and societies to relieve the monotony of mere academic existence. Yet these dreams remained but pious wishes; we were too busy being "pioneers" in a great educational endeavor. We left to you the task of going "collegiate" in real style. And you have done well!²¹

Certainly, the first governing board took great satisfaction in its efforts. Feuerstein would later write that "the feeling of awe with which the first governing board and then the school received the first *Commentator* will never be forgotten." Still, it could not have been easy for the young journalists. Criticism came quickly as Feuerstein found himself constantly dodging patronizing offers "to help the newspapermen with their English." In truth, however, the copy was for the most part sparkling clean, thanks to news editor Mordecai Gabriel's dedication to the technical angles of the paper. In fact, Gabriel's fingerprints were on so much of the newspaper that Feuerstein often had to listen sheepishly when fellow students would ask, "What do you do on the *Commie*, Moe?"²²

Once started, the next obstacle for *The Commentator* journalists was that none of them owned typewriters. As a result, Feuerstein's gang managed to

“borrow” typewriters from every part of the school building. It was not until the end of the spring semester when the problem was allayed and the newspaper had its own office, equipped with typographical implements.²³

As for the initial content of the paper, Feuerstein was committed to presenting his readers with professional-looking copy—as professional as an amateur collegiate newspaper could look, at least. The inaugural four-column edition reported on student activities and proposed changes to strengthen the quality of the Hebrew curriculum. It did not, however, make a single mention that this was, in fact, the editors’ first issue. In later editions that spring, the student journalists continued in stride, advocating for more Jewish studies and literature courses and petitioning for the postponement of a rumored “School of Business Administration.” The first governing board also penned editorials on broader issues, such as the Zionist efforts of the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and it levied criticism against Orthodox Jewry’s inactivity on that matter.²⁴

In addition to reporting and editorializing on serious news, the paper also contained a number of humor columns, which often poked fun at the editors themselves. William Kaufman, the newspaper’s first sports editor, many years later commented on the publication’s first editorial squad:

Our dilemma, as expressed so frequently by Moe Feuerstein, was to control a diarrhea of words in the face of a constipation of ideas. But like Pavlov’s dogs once the pen touched the fingers the ink flowed like borscht in the streets of Moscow... At that, however, it was probably a coefficient of the times. We were the kids of a Depression who couldn’t really take ourselves seriously. There were few of the luxuries around so laughter became a necessity. Of course, there weren’t too many of the necessities around either.²⁵

However, in an editorial titled “Looking Backward,” in the year’s final issue printed on 20 May 1935, members of Feuerstein’s governing board permitted themselves some youthful reflection on their project. Observing how taken the students were with the newspaper’s first semester, the board made sure to end the year with well-deserved self-adulation: “As this issue goes to press,” the editorial began,

the first term of the life of *The Commentator* draws to a close. The very appearance of *The Commentator* at the scheduled bi-weekly intervals was already a record breaking phenomenon in the history of the College and student activities. That a tradition so deeply rooted in the atmosphere of Yeshiva could be violated by an immature and struggling young newspaper was merely another omen that even greater surprises were yet in store for the institution.²⁶

Student council’s Petegorsky, who quietly handled the so-called political end of the newspaper, made similar remarks about the paper in that year’s issue

of *Masmid*. “Raising and crystallizing issues fundamental in their nature, *The Commentator* led the fight for reform and innovation in a manner hitherto impossible,” the student council president wrote. “It stands forth as the tower in the imposing edifice that will remain as a monument to the work of the 1935 student council.”²⁷

The Students Versus the First Dean of Yeshiva College

Thanks to a string of all-nighters at Bergen Press Corporation at 18 South Dean Street in Englewood, New Jersey, which produced the first five editions during the spring of 1935, Feuerstein’s *Commentator* solidified its place on the Yeshiva campus. The next semester Feuerstein, now a senior, returned, accompanied by most of his original governing board to lead *The Commentator* the following year. Yet, as it commenced its first full year of publication, its news and editorial content carried on with a predominantly mild tone. Most front-page articles reported on campus clubs and lectures. On page two, Feuerstein’s editorials remained upbeat and at times self-promoting. When students returned to campus in the fall of 1935 to hear of the formal establishment of a Hebrew department—one of the cardinal planks of *The Commentator* during the previous semester—Feuerstein made sure his readers acknowledged the newspaper’s victory, no matter how small. Several articles in the fall reported on Feuerstein’s speeches before the student body, his unanimous election to chair the Yeshiva College chapter of the American Student Union, and his trip to Washington, DC, where he and two other student leaders represented Yeshiva College at the American Institute for Public Affairs’ annual convention.²⁸

However self-aggrandizing these stories were, they apparently were what the readership wanted. One banner headline in the front-page columns that fall told the Yeshiva community of the strong endorsements the newspaper had received from alumni leaders. An editorial printed later in the semester relayed the comments printed by Boston’s *Jewish Advocate*, which reviewed *The Commentator* as a newspaper as “full of pep, dash and gossip as any collegiate publication.” The reviewer commented on the lively headlines and editorials as well as the professionalism of the sports editor, who “has apparently mastered sports language.”²⁹

The governing board took some issue with the Yeshiva College policies, but it appears that its overwhelmingly benign attitude toward the institution kept the newspaper in the good graces of the Revel administration. In fact, one reader wrote to the paper during that first semester complaining that the total of all the governing board’s editorials “has been some mild and evasive opinions on general questions.” Despite this, the journalists’ generally complimentary pieces on the school’s administration did not cease that year under Feuerstein, whose family maintained a close relationship with President Revel.³⁰

Another explanation for the newspaper's timidity is that Feuerstein and his fellow editors could not be sure how the Yeshiva community would react to saber-rattling college journalists. Although the previous generations of Yeshiva students published newssheets, they were sporadic and functioned more as bulletins to inform students of prayer times and special lectures. Certainly, in an institution modeled after the yeshivot of Eastern Europe, many rabbis and teachers spoke up in opposition when Feuerstein petitioned the administration to start a college newspaper in 1934. And to the consternation of the young journalists, the faculty did not desist from protesting once the publication was underway. Mindful of how hard it was to call in favors and ultimately convince Revel to permit publication, Feuerstein was careful in his first months to straddle the thin line between editing a liberal arts college newspaper and behaving as a respectful yeshiva student.

Yet, it would not be long before *The Commentator* started to develop a reputation for irreverent editorial columns. Just more than a year after printing its first edition, *The Commentator* aimed its crosshairs at Dr. Shelley R. Safir, the first dean of Yeshiva College, appointed in 1931. Safir was a "close associate" of Revel and served for many years as principal of the Talmudical Academy. When, in the late 1920s, Revel set about assembling a college faculty, Safir was one of the few men Revel trusted for counsel. It was mostly due to his relationship with Revel that Safir received the deanship.³¹

However, while he had the backing of the school's higher administration, Safir's relationship with the student body was fraught with animosities, which surfaced from the time he assumed the deanship. As time progressed, Safir removed himself from student activities, including the newspaper. In Feuerstein's three semesters of running the paper, we do not find a single quote attributed to Safir or inclusion of his name in any news story. Instead, campus reporters retrieved Yeshiva College news from Registrar Jacob I. Hartstein. Yet, in the publication's first year, despite student-organized opposition to Safir, *The Commentator* omitted any mention of the conflict. This omission is especially noteworthy after considering that, on several occasions that year, editors were called into Safir's office under threat of censorship and disbandment.³²

After two semesters of placating administrators, *The Commentator* in the spring of 1936 finally devoted significant space to sharp criticism of Safir. Perhaps Feuerstein was aware of the faculty's growing displeasure with Safir's handling of the college's finances in the thick of the Great Depression. Also, with his father's strong ties to Revel and with knowledge of the president's deteriorating health and preoccupation with fundraising, Feuerstein must have known that resistance to any attack in the paper would not be forthcoming from Safir's superiors.³³

Teaming up with student government, the newspaper's front-page headline of the 19 March 1936 issue read:

DEAN SAFIR CHARGED AS UNFIT FOR OFFICE;
STUDENT COUNCIL ORDERS IMMEDIATE PROBE
OF INDICTMENTS

Reportedly, three days prior to publication, student council held an hour-long session in which members accused the dean of “total disregard” for Yeshiva’s religious ideals, incompetence in fulfilling his role as dean, alienation of students, and behaving immorally in a way unbecoming his office. After hearing the charges, student council established a committee to investigate and report back their findings. In an accompanying editorial, Feuerstein’s board supported student council’s decision to probe the students’ case against Dean Safir but cautioned representatives to engage only in “fair play.” Despite their strategically reserved tenor, the editors could not resist emphasizing that “the charges against Dr. Safir are of such a serious nature that, if substantiated, they would definitely disqualify a man from the deanship of any college, much less Yeshiva.”³⁴

The newspaper’s deliberate vagueness in addressing the exact details of student council’s accusations reflects a certain hesitation on the journalists’ part. The serious charges levied against Safir would have made for the kind of controversy that journalists at other colleges craved. Yet, at least in the earliest days, the editors of *The Commentator* viewed themselves not as a fourth estate, but as a part of student leadership meant to work toward bettering the college. They were both wary of projecting flippancy unbefitting rabbinical students and were, at the same time, college students raring to get involved in the politics of their beloved school.

In a three-page resolution, student council outlined much more grievous indictments than the ones to which the paper alluded. Student council claimed to have in its possession copies of letters from Revel to Safir that proved that the dean mishandled funds for both the college and the Talmudical Academy. In listing Safir’s “acts against Jewish law,” the council reported the following:

Students were sent by the Dean to a non Kosher restaurant for the purchase of meat sandwiches.

Dr. Safir was seen on several occasions driving to and from the Yeshiva in his car on the Sabbath. On one occasion in tennis clothes and with tennis equipment.³⁵

Student council also cited the dean’s use of “loud and intemperate language.” However, most astounding of all was the council’s claim that “Dr. Safir has appeared to be unduly intimate with his former secretary.” As a result of Safir’s alleged affair and the newspaper’s very public reporting of the charges, Revel appointed a committee of five Yeshiva College professors to do

whatever you may deem necessary in order to ascertain all the facts in this connection. This includes the calling of witnesses and the examination of all pertinent evidence.

Upon completion of your investigation you will kindly present to me your findings together with your recommendations.³⁶

In a letter from the committee members to Safir, dated 11 May 1936, they informed the dean that they were “happy to state that a great many of these [charges] could be rejected as irrelevant without further investigation. There remain, however, certain others which require examination.” While we cannot know which accusations resulted in Safir’s eventual removal from the deanship, we can be sure that the students were the ones primarily responsible for the dismissal. Further, it is without doubt that Feuerstein and his fellow editors were aware of the details of student council’s charges. Nevertheless, despite enough ammunition to involve the school’s trustees, *The Commentator*’s self-censored news and editorial treatment of the affair reflects a level of timidity as well as respect for the graveness of the situation. Whether the governing board’s decision was based on respect for Safir’s personal privacy, for the integrity of the college, or in keeping with the strict halakhic guidelines against slanderous speech is also unknowable. What can be said, though, is that to this point, the Yeshiva College journalists were not prepared to conduct their newspaper in the no-holds-barred fashion of most other campus newspapers.

After the March edition and for the remainder of the semester, *The Commentator* chose to refrain from further direct discussion of the Safir affair. However, with an irreverent punch, it did opt to reprint a letter to the editor from Safir that was originally published in the paper’s inaugural issue that described the newspaper as a “source of gratification” and expressed the dean’s hope that it would “serve as a link to the students and the faculty.” The only other reference to Safir came in *The Commentator*’s final issue of the year. On the front page, an article released the results of a poll taken of the Yeshiva College senior class. The typical graduating senior of 1936, the article reported, would resign if he were the dean of Yeshiva College. The same news piece acknowledged Feuerstein, who was voted the most popular student, the most likely to succeed, and the school’s “biggest politician”; it also stated that he had done the most for Yeshiva College. In the end, it was the young Feuerstein, very mindful of the boundaries of his political environment, who had his way.³⁷

In the aftermath of the episode, Safir remained an instructor of biology in the college and principal of the Talmudical Academy until he retired in 1963. However, he was forced to resign from his more prestigious post as Yeshiva College dean in June 1936. As one of the principal elements in Safir’s undoing, Feuerstein’s *Commentator* came out of its first contentious bout of politics victorious. In total, Feuerstein produced fourteen issues in his second

year as editor-in-chief and made sure *The Commentator* located advertising to compensate for the meager fifteen dollars it received from student council. Feuerstein passed the editorial reins to Mordecai Gabriel and headed for Harvard Business School. Yet, it would not be long before he once again figured into more *Commentator* politics.³⁸

Agitations and Curriculums: Editorializing a Mission

Student journalism at Yeshiva College began during a time of transition for the college press. At the onset of the 1930s, American collegiate journalism was known for its “unhesitant pandering” to the administration and “devout catering to the institutions made sacred by trustees, alumni and their subordinates.” However, at Columbia University in 1932, Reed Harris, editor of *The Spectator*, broke the mold when he condemned the scandalous operations of the school’s dining halls. The unprecedented editorial, printed in March of that year, was enough for administrators to expel Harris. Although he was eventually reinstated, the dean capitulated only after four thousand students staged a one-day rally at Columbia. Receiving national media attention, the event did more than arouse an entire Ivy League student body; it set off a chain of editorial reaction in campus newspapers across the country.³⁹

In fact, so significant was the Harris episode that one observer stated: “Teachers and others familiar with American student life agreed that the Columbia strike was the most militant student demonstration of recent years.” It was further noted “far and wide that at last American college students were becoming excited over something more important than football and crew.” In fact, the culture of collegiate newspaper writing had changed so drastically that, by the time another student journalist arrived on campus later in the decade, Columbia’s newspaper carried a very different reputation. “*The Spectator*,” the student recalled, “was always starting some kind of a fight and calling for mass-meetings and strikes and demonstrations.” Just a few miles up Broadway in Washington Heights, Feuerstein took great interest in these matters. He and his friends yearned to create that kind of rebellious social climate at Yeshiva College.⁴⁰

After serving as the newspaper’s first news editor and then as Feuerstein’s second-in-command the following term, Mordecai Gabriel was well prepared to handle all sides of the newspaper—editorial, technical, and political. In an article announcing his promotion in the spring of 1936, the ambitious Gabriel promised disbelieving readers that his dedicated board would produce a six-page weekly publication.⁴¹

Upon returning to campus at the start of the fall semester, *The Commentator* editors organized themselves to address several pertinent issues on campus. These included advocating for support for the students’ dramatic society and support for the Jewish settlements in Palestine. Also in 1936, Gabriel’s governing board

would seek to point out the second-class treatment the Yeshiva College student council received as compared with the administration's treatment of RIETS's student council, the Student Organization of Yeshiva, whose constituents were perceived as more observant and mature than the Yeshiva College students.

Important as those matters were, they received second billing once Gabriel's board got word of the faculty's decision to increase the required time for a Yeshiva College baccalaureate degree to five years, beginning with that year's incoming class of freshmen. Registrar Jacob I. Hartstein announced the "Five Year Plan" in an article on the front page of the semester's first issue. "The purpose of the plan," according to the article, was "to allow for concentration on academic work and at the same time provide a greater amount of leisure for college men taking full programs in the Department of Jewish studies." Although the journalists were certain that the plan would be met with student frustration, "reliable sources" informed them that, in fact, the previous year's student council's alleged strong push for the policy change was the deciding factor. Yet, despite plenty of campus commotion from faculty and students, Gabriel believed the plan had little chance for success with a deanless college, and therefore he did not permit the newspaper to voice its opinion on the issue.⁴²

Two months after the plan's introduction, considerable signs of student frustration manifested themselves, as they had over the Safir affair. If there was any validity to the previous student council's encouragement of the new policy, the current council reversed its predecessor's stance to align better with student consensus. Impelled to action by news of the Yeshiva College Alumni Association's resolution supporting the added year of study, student council issued its own resolution denouncing the application of the Five Year Plan to the current freshmen class.⁴³

Also in that issue, the editors, realizing that administrators were willing to make policy changes with or without a permanent dean in place, dropped their editorial silence on the matter with sharp criticism in its editorial pages. Gabriel and his governing board decried the faculty for instituting the Five Year Plan "without any program or design whatsoever." In addition, although the journalists acknowledged that the policy, in theory, was "a scheme revolutionary in effect," *The Commentator*, with "the future of Yeshiva College" at stake, declared:

In attempting to carry out the plan, the administration has already bungled things. Instead of first attempting to enlist the support of the students for its policy, the administration just imposed it upon them, expecting a silence betokening acquiescence. Actually, this manner of procedure has only served to incense student opinion. Under these circumstances, no co-operation can be expected from the students.⁴⁴

Forced by vociferous student outcry, the faculty regrouped to revise its policy. In the new version of the Five Year Plan, students averaging a “B” or higher would be exempted from spending an extra year at Yeshiva College. Those students who failed to maintain at least a “B” would be required to fulfill a limited number of courses during a supplementary fifth year. Efforts to placate the student body failed, however. In a “special meeting” held 30 December 1936, student council voted unanimously against the adoption of the revised Five Year Plan. The newspaper reiterated its opinions about the “absurd” plan, claiming that “instead of intensifying the present course of study, it is simplifying it for those who cannot keep up with it.”⁴⁵

After two weeks of negotiations with faculty, student council finally agreed to deploy a committee to investigate student opinion of the Five Year Plan and report its findings. If the faculty had any doubt which student group was leading the crusade against the plan, proof came with the announcement of the committee members: Three of four were also key members of *The Commentator*—Gabriel, Managing Editor Eleazer Goldman, and A. Leo Levin, who would serve as editor-in-chief the following year. Also noteworthy, at the same meeting, student council approved a formalized constitution for the newspaper that provided the editors with autonomous control of its content to its governing board, thereby limiting student council’s involvement to finances, exclusively. The newspaper’s strong influence over student sentiment, it appears, reached all the way to the student body’s elected leadership.⁴⁶

The Commentator fanned student hostility, which continued throughout the following spring semester. The final story on the Five Year Plan ran in Gabriel’s last issue as editor. The newspaper and student council threatened “extreme action” as their members prepared to rally students against the Five Year Plan. Yet, whatever actions they had in mind were never employed; Yeshiva College policy makers dropped their Five Year Plan that summer. For a second straight year, *The Commentator* adopted a strong stand against the administration—and won. The newspaper’s reporting of the Five Year Plan far exceeded that of any news coverage in its first two years. Indeed, in their coverage of the charges brought against Safir, *Commentator* journalists were aided by the editor-in-chief’s significant pull with Revel and prior knowledge that Safir’s job security was already precarious. With regard to the Five Year Plan, on the other hand, the only allies the governing board could count on were its fellow students.⁴⁷

In contrast to their handling of the Safir controversy, believing that the basic rights of the student body were at stake, the journalists did not struggle with being at the same time a college newspaper—undaunted and daring—and a yeshiva publication—always expected to remain subordinate to the will of the teachers. To the chagrin of its opponents, *The Commentator* was emerging, at least in the eyes of its editors, as a synthesis of traditionally Jewish and modern sentiments. Accordingly, the newspaper did not hold back, utilizing strident

and oftentimes very cutting language to advance students' causes. Reflecting on a year of name-calling and sharp accusations, the 1937 student council president lamented that faculty-student relations are "not close enough to assure a mutual understanding and combined effort at improvement of the students' lot." Consequently, Yeshiva College students banded together, in spite of faculty and alumni opposition.⁴⁸

From the faculty's standpoint, they were without strong leadership to quell student unrest. In addition to operating without a dean, Yeshiva College faculty was mostly without its president. Revel was far too busy searching for funds to keep the school running than to be involved with the day-to-day chores affecting Yeshiva College and RIETS. Already after the first wave of articles on the Five Year Plan, the faculty sensed that the newspaper under Gabriel's editorship would be more critical of the college than it had been under Feuerstein. For a brief period, a committee to quietly monitor *The Commentator* was formed under Dr. Moses L. Isaacs, head of the department of physical sciences and secretary of Yeshiva College. Yet, when the committee asked Revel to intervene over the paper's truculent opposition to the Five Year Plan, he rebuffed, recommending instead "to let the matter rest."⁴⁹

Consequently, the battle over the Five Year Plan was, all things considered, the first significant issue about which the undergraduates of Yeshiva College confronted the faculty head-on. In this matter, with *The Commentator* leading the way, the students demonstrated that they held the upper hand in the early history of the school.⁵⁰

Be that as it may, students saw a vital need for congenial discussion with administrators. Cognizant of their difficulty to negotiate on policies with a disorganized faculty, they pushed the administration to appoint a dean. Since Safir's resignation at the beginning of the summer of 1936, *The Commentator*, perhaps mirroring its own self-appointed role on campus, supported the selection of a dean who represented "the highest synthesis of Torah Judaism with modern secular culture." Although they were at odds regarding the Five Year Plan, the newspaper received support from the very active members of the Yeshiva College Alumni Association, who were oftentimes more informed about Yeshiva politics than was the newspaper. In various articles throughout Gabriel's tenure as editor, *The Commentator*, as well as the *Alumni Quarterly*, discussed the importance of a dean as the "one person in the position to handle the various aspects of the college program with an eye to their co-ordination." In the following year, under the leadership of Editor-in-Chief A. Leo Levin, the newspaper increased its coverage of the search for a dean. Again encouraged by vocal alumni leaders, the governing board printed editorials demanding a speedy appointment of second dean for Yeshiva College.⁵¹

After a good deal of commotion, an alumni committee recommended Moses Isaacs—one of the original members of the faculty, a college secretary, and the

faculty member who had been appointed to chair the committee to oversee *The Commentator* the previous year—for the deanship. “We are in full agreement with the unanimous contention of the Alumni,” the student newsmen wrote in an editorial, “that Professor Isaacs fulfills the rigid qualifications demanded of the dean of Yeshiva College most admirably.” Within a week, Revel announced Isaacs’s appointment. More than just dean, Isaacs was charged with jurisdiction over curricula, finances, and faculty appointments, and therefore elevated to the title of assistant to the president of the college. Alumni, faculty, and students hailed the move as a positive change for the college’s various programs.⁵²

“Change” was also the word to describe *The Commentator*’s new outlook on Yeshiva College and its new administration. Unlike the situation under Safir, Isaacs granted interviews to the collegiate reporters and access into his proposals to the faculty. The newspaper ran an editorial expressing its conviction that Isaacs would spare no effort to avail himself to students. This belief proved correct and, at least over the next several years, *The Commentator* was upbeat about Isaacs’s various initiatives. Moreover, by way of feeding the paper with stories—the dean would often post news items on a bulletin board outside his office—Isaacs made sure that his superiors, students, alumni, and benefactors read the kinds of stories he preferred them to read. In this way, *The Commentator* became a useful mouthpiece for the young dean looking to hire faculty and add to enrollment numbers. After a few seasons of trial and error, Yeshiva College and its sometimes-contentious, sometimes-obedient student newspaper were finally on the same page.⁵³

However, calamity soon befell Yeshiva with the untimely deaths of President Revel and Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik, RIETS’s senior rabbinic faculty member. Once again, with the young institution facing impending disarray, the undergraduates began to lose faith in Yeshiva’s leadership. Student leaders and editors hastily, and without consulting college officials, prepared themselves for another battle to take place in the pages of their *Commentator*.

The Rabbi Soloveitchik Affair

Bernard Revel was explicitly uninvolved with *The Commentator*; there is not a single quotation in its pages attributed to him. Yet, the young journalists—who, along with the entire student body, saw Revel as a true role model—made sure the front page included all news of their president’s many speaking engagements and honors, whenever possible. Students’ adoration and keen interest in Yeshiva’s president even extended to mundane activities, including an article at the top of the 16 February 1938 edition’s front page, with the headline: “Dr. Revel Leaves for Vacation in Florida.” According to the article, a “much needed rest from his strenuous duties at the Yeshiva” was reportedly the impetus for the six-week holiday.⁵⁴

At that time, the journalists were probably unaware that Revel's health was fading. As Revel's biographer notes, many within the Yeshiva community were aware that Revel was severely drained from the anxieties of overseeing Yeshiva's bleak financial situation. Few, however, were cognizant of the toll the job had taken on his physical fitness. Therefore, when news broke that Revel suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while lecturing to a class of rabbinic students on 19 November 1940, the community was seized with apprehension; the thought of Yeshiva without Revel, for his supporters and detractors alike, was inconceivable. Despite the sobering realization that he most likely would never step into the school again, *The Commentator* published a passionate editorial praying for the welfare of Yeshiva's leader. "We are confident," the paper asserted, "that the wages of such selfless devotion as that of Dr. Revel—long life and health—will be his recompense, and in this spirit we wish him a speedy refuah shlemah," a full recovery.⁵⁵

That prayer, along with the prayers of thousands more, went unanswered. Dr. Bernard Revel, Yeshiva's first president, died almost two weeks later, on 2 December 1940, at the age of fifty-five.

With the institution now in a state of turmoil, several groups—both within and without the school—competed for control of Yeshiva. One group very forthcoming about its attempt to take over was the Agudath ha-Rabbonim. Established in 1902 by European-trained rabbis, the Agudath ha-Rabbonim was a highly influential fraternity dedicated to resisting all kinds of modernization of the American Orthodox synagogue and rabbinate. Consequently, much of its energies were focused on competing against the modern-leaning Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and its brother organization, the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA). Although the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, generally speaking, disapproved of Yeshiva College's academic interests, its organization was fastened tightly to Yeshiva's operations. The Agudath ha-Rabbonim appointed the members of the school's rabbinic advisory board and, until 1936, when the two institutions started to drift apart, RIETS ordination was conferred jointly by Yeshiva and the Agudath ha-Rabbonim. Despite its affiliations, however, and due to the Agudath ha-Rabbonim's strong opposition to secular studies, there was a widening disconnect between Yeshiva and the rabbinic organization from the time Revel opened Yeshiva College in 1928.⁵⁶

Only one day after Revel's demise, leaders of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim sent a telegraph to Samuel Levy, chair of Yeshiva's board of directors, dated 3 December 1940, informing him of the rabbis' intent "to supervise and conduct the affairs of the Yeshiva until such time that a worthy successor to the late Doctor Revel is chosen with the approval of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim." The next day, Levy wrote back to the rabbinic group to let them know he intended to keep all matters of Yeshiva to the discretion of its trustees until a new president would be named. Through a series of letters, a dialogue continued,

basically consisting of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim's claims to Yeshiva and Levy's continuous rebuffs.⁵⁷

After Levy appointed Samuel Belkin, Moses L. Isaacs, and Samuel Sar on 8 December 1940 to serve as the executive committee to temporarily handle Yeshiva's affairs, the Agudath ha-Rabbonim issued a forceful letter instructing Levy to step aside. In place of Levy and his executive committee, five members of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim were prepared to begin their purported role as the "Directorate of the Yeshiva." Among the five rabbis were the prominent Eliezer Silver, the head of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, and Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the brilliant, young leader who served unofficially as chief rabbi of Boston.

The disagreement soon reached the public. Very quickly, it became well known that there were two frontrunner candidates for Yeshiva's presidency: Rabbi Soloveitchik and Rabbi Leo Jung, spiritual leader of The Jewish Center in Manhattan's Upper West Side and professor of ethics at Yeshiva College. Reflecting on these events many years later, Joseph H. Lookstein, rabbi of the prominent Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and Yeshiva insider, recalled that the student body became unprecedentedly involved in the affairs of the board of directors. "Even the students, unbecomingly activist," remembered Lookstein, "campaigning for or against certain candidates. Such student involvement was happily unknown in those days and at Yeshiva it should have remained unknown." Thus, with rumors and debates raging through the campus, Student Council President Hyman Chanover penned the following letter to Levy, on 20 December:

We, however, cannot view but with apprehension the activity of groups outside the walls of the Yeshiva who we wish to believe, are motivated by a sincere interest in Yeshiva and in American Jewry. The ideal of Yeshiva and Yeshiva College, which places its emphasis first and foremost upon Yeshiva, on Torah, and then upon the harmonious blending with the secular training, as envisaged by Dr. Revel, has at times been severely criticized by these very same groups. That ideal must be our guiding force. We must recognize the fact that Yeshiva and Yeshiva College are one integrated unit and not two independent ones where the interests of one conflict with the purpose of the other.⁵⁸

For their part, *The Commentator* editors teamed with Chanover, who served as editor-in-chief of the paper the year before, to bellow the flames as long as possible. In fact, themes and language from Chanover's letter to Levy resonated in an impassioned editorial in the 8 January 1941 issue of the paper:

As conceived by Dr. Revel and accepted by those who could understand and appreciate the contribution of the Yeshiva concept, the aim of Yeshiva is the proper integration into an organic unity of our Jewish religious heritage with modern secular culture. The *raison d'être* thus conceived demands an institution which is to be more than the mere collation of several, distinct

departments. Rather does it regard Yeshiva as a body the members of which function as an organized whole, this whole being in reality greater than the sum of its parts. In these momentous days when decisive measures are being contemplated, students are justified in feeling that this historic aim for which so much has been sacrificed must remain the guiding star of Yeshiva—to maximize its potentialities as a dynamo of spiritual and cultural energy.

They have, moreover, the right to expect that historic aim to be represented in the personality of the man, whoever he be, designated as the successor of our deceased pathfinder.

Yeshiva and Yeshiva College are one, and only one unit. Jewry, then, is looking forward to a continuation of that unity in the appointment of our Rosh Yeshiva and president of the College faculty. He must personify the principles, philosophy and spirit which are the very life breath of our great institution.⁵⁹

If the political flames had any chance to simmer, it was only for a short while. Just two months after Revel's passing, Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik, RIETS's senior *rosh yeshiva* and father of Joseph Soloveitchik, passed away at age sixty-two. In her memoir, Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman, Moses's daughter, contends that "false and vicious gossip concerning" Joseph's character weighed heavily on the elder Soloveitchik. "My father," Meiselman asserts, "was tormented by these reports and finally became debilitated, developing a high fever."⁶⁰ Although certainly not meant to be taken at face value, Meiselman's comments bring into focus the level of political tension stirring at Yeshiva at this time.

At any rate, in a headline that draped the top of its front page, *The Commentator* announced:

THOUSANDS PAY LAST TRIBUTE TO RABBI MOSES
SOLOVEITCHIK

The article detailed the funeral service held in Yeshiva's Lampport Auditorium. One eulogist, a member of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, said before an audience of four thousand that Yeshiva's students "are now left as orphans with both their father and mother, Dr. Revel and Rabbi Soloveitchik, gone." Yet, according to the article, "by far the most touching words of the afternoon came from the lips of Rabbi Soloveitchik's oldest son, Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, chief rabbi of Boston. He portrayed to the weeping audience how he and his father had continually exchanged profound and intricate matters of Jewish Law."⁶¹

Soon after Moses Soloveitchik's death, the Agudath ha-Rabbonim again wrote to Samuel Levy. This time, the rabbis reported to the Yeshiva chairman that its members unanimously voted that Joseph B. Soloveitchik should be selected to fill the void left by his father's passing. The letter affirmed unequivocally that "in accordance with Jewish law and tradition Rabbi Dr. J.D. Soloveitchik

is to succeed his great father as *Rosh Yeshiva*.” It was also around this time that Levy received a memorandum signed by fifty-eight students requesting that Soloveitchik be appointed to succeed his father. After Levy responded to the Agudath ha-Rabbonim that he would take the suggestion under advisement, the Agudath ha-Rabbonim wrote another telegram to clarify Levy’s “misunderstanding” that its prior communication was merely a “suggestion.” As “the only authority on Torah Judaism in this country,” the group demanded that Soloveitchik assume the post of senior *rosh yeshiva*, as he “is the lawful heir to his father’s position.”⁶²

Meanwhile, on the front page of the following edition of *The Commentator*, the feature article recapped a special address delivered by Alumni President Moses I. Feuerstein. With more than five hundred in attendance, Feuerstein, *The Commentator*’s founding editor and one of Yeshiva College’s top graduates, took the opportunity to audibly editorialize about Yeshiva’s current predicament. Ominous politics within the Jewish community in his hometown, Brookline, Massachusetts, motivated the urgent tones in Feuerstein’s speech. Soloveitchik, due to several changes implemented in Boston’s Orthodox community at his behest, had become increasingly unpopular among the rabbinic members of the city’s Vaad ha-Rabbonim. This rift, which eventually turned into scandal and a legal suit filed against him, was exacerbated further when the community’s laity sought to get involved.⁶³

While Feuerstein, whose affluent family sided with the Vaad, let others carry on the fight in Boston—much of it in the pages of the city’s *Jewish Advocate*—he believed he would be most effective on Yeshiva’s political stage, where, despite his youth, he was already something of a celebrity. By this time, Yeshiva administrators and contributors had taken sides in the search for Yeshiva’s next president. The politics surrounding this debate were so loud and complex that many rumors circulated, quite a few with contradicting stories. One report that went uncontested, however, was the Feuerstein family’s position in this drama. Moses Feuerstein’s father, Samuel, maintained close ties with Rabbi Jung and the well-heeled members of The Jewish Center, who contributed toward many of the same Jewish organizations that Feuerstein supported. As for the son, Moses Feuerstein was just beginning to develop lifelong relationships with Jung and his son-in-law, Leonard Rosenfeld. These factors, along with the Feuerstein family’s opposition to Soloveitchik in Boston matters, led the young politician to advocate for Jung’s candidacy. “Yeshiva will stand or fall on the type of leadership rendered by the men who are put into key positions,” Feuerstein predicted in his fiery speech before students and alumni at Yeshiva’s campus. Feuerstein, known as the “golden boy” to the Yeshiva community, warned of precipitous choices and cautioned that “grave danger” stood in the way of Yeshiva’s reaching its grand potential.⁶⁴

To complement the newspaper's coverage of Feuerstein's speech, editor-in-chief Ephraim F. Mandelcorn—described as “one man who fears no battles on the Yeshiva front”—appended an editorial that repeated many of Feuerstein's comments:

Yeshiva must be a smoothly functioning organization consisting of leaders temperamentally capable of working in harmony for the best interests of the institution. It can no longer tolerate internal strife, tending to slacken the bonds of cooperative fellowship.

The realization of the possibilities of such an appreciative leadership is a challenge to the greatest men of traditional Judaism of our age. It is self-evident that there will be many aspirants. It remains the responsibility of those vitally interested in Yeshiva to judge each aspirant on the basis of his qualifications rather than the intensity of his desire for the position or the ends to which he will go to attain it.

Finally, reminding readers of the paper's earliest bouts, Mandelcorn's governing board concluded the column affirming that, just as Yeshiva's student body averted crises in the past, so, too, the “present study body shall ourselves not be found wanting.”⁶⁵

If readers inferred from the editorial that the journalists were sending a warning shot or holding back information on this heated gossip, their presumptions were confirmed in the next issue. Before Feuerstein departed the Washington Heights campus, he informed the editors and student council of all the intimate details regarding Soloveitchik's candidacy for *rosh yeshiva*. Most assuredly, as an alumnus of great repute and a former *Commentator* editor, Feuerstein's elaborate report went unquestioned.⁶⁶

About a month earlier, the collegiate journalists had praised Soloveitchik for his eloquence in eulogizing his famed father. Yet, they were now convinced that the erudite speaker described in that article was nothing but a façade. For them, all apprehension in releasing the story centered around *The Commentator's* role in RIETS. In its earliest years, the newspaper rarely went on record with controversial matters. When it did, as we have seen, the stories were generally muted to some degree and always focused squarely on Yeshiva College politics. Any report on the Agudath ha-Rabbonim's attempt to install Soloveitchik as the head of RIETS as well as Yeshiva College would broaden the paper's coverage to concerns beyond the scope of the college proper.

With Feuerstein's stirring speech reverberating in their minds, the governing board launched its 19 March 1941 issue with an intention to make heads turn. The major headline of that edition, which bannered across the front page, read:

AGUDATH HORABONIM ATTEMPTING 'SMEAR' CAMPAIGN AGAINST YESHIVA

The article was written anonymously. However, when Yeshiva students still spoke of the piece around campus a decade later, it was well known that Chanover, Mandelcorn, and Rabbi Jung's son-in-law, Leonard Rosenfeld, were the students most responsible for the copy. Sensing the gravity of this report, not only was the byline of the article given an untraceable pseudonym, the article itself was prefaced with the following disclaimer:

The article which follows has been carefully checked as to reliability and its authenticity is unimpeachable. Because of unscrupulous use of intimidation against those bearing damaging evidence regarding Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's record and character, the *Commentator* is compelled to hold its sources confidential and is permitted to release them only to the Board of Directors upon a formal request.⁶⁷

Correctly informed of the unrelenting letters sent to Levy, the article revealed that the Agudath ha-Rabbonim had been making "every effort to force the appointment of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik" to the position of *rosh yeshiva*. The subsequent claims made in the story, however, came from Feuerstein, directly. The young reporters charged that the Agudath ha-Rabbonim vowed to contact all "world-renowned" rabbis, cautioning them "against having any connection with Yeshiva until the appointment of Rabbi Soloveitchik is forced through." Soloveitchik, they said, would also be contacting those rabbis with the same message. Moreover, the article stated that Soloveitchik allegedly sought an unreasonably high salary from the school, and it charged that he wanted more than just his father's position:

Rabbi Soloveitchik has let it be known that, if appointed to his father's position, he would not recognize any existing superior authority in the Yeshiva proper. It is intimated in certain quarters that for Rabbi Soloveitchik the position of Rosh Yeshiva would merely be a stepping-stone to the presidency of Yeshiva and Yeshiva College.⁶⁸

In what would become their *modus operandi* when reporting on major stories, the editors appended an editorial meant to defend the school so that the student body should not "stand by idly in the rape of an institution." The editors accused the Agudath ha-Rabbonim of employing a "tactic of presenting the candidate superficially-admirably suited for the position and yet possessed of that basic character defect which makes him a willing tool or an active partner to its plans." Finally, in an attempt to win over Yeshiva board members who were presumably doing their best to sidestep "powerful propaganda," the newspaper concluded:

Faculty-Student Mixer-Student

The Commentator

Get Ads For The Masmit

YESHIVA COLLEGE

VOLUME XIII

A 378

NEW YORK CITY, WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 1941.

No. 4

AGUDATH HORABONIM ATTEMPTING 'SMEAR' CAMPAIGN AGAINST YESHIVA

Author Jan Valtin Is Ex-Yeshiva Inmate

But He Wasn't English Prof, Only Humble Porter

Jan Valtin, the never photographed but much discussed author of the sensational new book "Out of the Night", was an employee of Yeshiva College from June 5 to August 1, 1933. That is the startling fact that your loving reporter was able to have confirmed. This new famous author employed by our great institution, not, as you might think, in the role of an associate professor of literature, or a lecturer in the ways and wiles of the third Reich, but in the humble, if vital, capacity of painter and porter.

Mixed By Mr. Purvis
In 1930, Jan Valtin presented himself at the door of our alma mater—in answer to a call for a painter. He had two reliable references, which were checked and found to be satisfactory. Mr. Stuart Purvis, head of the maintenance department, describes him at that time as being slightly taller than average, robust, and apparently healthy. At any rate, he passed the entrance exams in painting, and was duly inducted into the department. Next, he was given a hand up indicator which flashed a red light whenever an "OK" or "GIBTACHT" was sighted. He remained here in painter capacity for some weeks, and then was graduated to the position

of a full fidget porter at 60 dollars a month. During this period, he resided at the Yeshiva, and succeeded in driving his neighbors insane with his incessant trilling until all hours of the night, finally being moved into a private room by the superintendent, where he could type away to his heart's content.

The subject of his efforts at this time was not his book—no. He was writing short stories, placing some of them, but having most rejected. Mr. Purvis recalls seeing a check for thirty-five dollars that Valtin received for a story of his entitled "Shanghai Ann". His seafaring life was reflected in the plots of his stories, which dealt largely with this subject, and in his reserved, almost secretive manner.

A Caseworker Worker
My informant does not recall seeing any news or news on Valtin's work, but then perhaps he didn't look too hard. Valtin was a thorough, conscientious worker, quiet, but not unkindly. He was far from the crowd, beset thing after thing, but would expect him to be able to handle the experiences which he underwent. In fact, the maintenance head extended his "welcome" to Valtin, the fruits of certain passages in Valtin's book, on the grounds that Valtin's conduct here was a little too happy

for a man who had passed through a German Concentration camp. His stability appears all the more remarkable when one considers that in July, 1933, he learned that his wife "was thrown into the Horow Camp Prisoners", according to his narrative.

"Sery to see him go."
But these comparatively mild doubts give way to genuine indignation at the remark made by Valtin to the "New Yorker" interviewer, in which he alleged that he was discharged from his position for trying to work in the basement. Whether it was meant in earnest, or as a gag, it is "a pure fabrication".

Mr. Purvis, who has done the hiring and firing of his men in the maintenance department for the past 14 years, states emphatically that Valtin left of his own free will. "In fact", says he, "I was sorry to see him go, for he was a fine work'er."

At any rate, let it never be said that Yeshiva has not sent forth its share of literary lions into the world. Who would expect him to be able to handle the experiences which he underwent. In fact, the maintenance head extended his "welcome" to Valtin, the fruits of certain passages in Valtin's book, on the grounds that Valtin's conduct here was a little too happy

Intimidation, Threats, Mark Tactics Of Pressure Group To Force Demands

By Y. H. R.

The article which follows has been carefully checked as to reliability, and its authenticity is unimpeachable. Because of unnecessary use of intimidation against those bearing damaging evidence regarding Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's record and the general commentator is compelled to hold its sources confidential and is permitted to release to the Board of Directors upon a formal request.

Abraham G. Duker



Abraham Duker Will Address Relations Group

Abraham G. Duker, the well known authority on the Jewish situation in Poland and Eastern Europe, will address the International Relations Society next Wednesday, March 26, at 8:20 p.m., in the Dormitory Social Hall, David Miller '42, president of the Society, announced.

Mr. Duker who as a Research Fellow of Columbia University has extensively travelled abroad studying the Jewish situation in Europe and especially in Poland, is the author of numerous articles and monographs on that subject. He is at present preparing a thesis for his doctorate based on his study of Jewish-Polish relations in the last century.

Besides having contributed to "The Reconstructionist," "The Jewish Social Service Quarterly," "Kiryath Sepher," "Current History," and other publications in the United States and abroad, Mr. Duker is Contributing Editor and Commentator on International Jewish affairs in "The Jewish Frontier," at the same time, he is also associate editor of "The Reconstructionist" magazine, Book Review editor of "The Jewish Social Service Quarterly," managing editor of "The Contemporary Record," and associate editor of the "United Jewish Encyclopedia".

Mr. Duker is especially qualified to discuss the topic for which he was chosen, having written various articles such as "The Situation of the Jews in Poland," and an introduction to Bar Brodov's "Nationalism and the Class Struggle," "The Jewish Situation in Poland," and who is universally admired for the successful administration of his "home camp." It is scheduled to address the class on March 25.

Driving reluctantly to the position of his choice in the impositions of Rosh Yeshiva, the Agudath Horabonim has been making every effort to force the appointment of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, it was ascertained.

Challenging the position to be his on the principle of "Shakla," the Agudath Horabonim has decreed that Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik has an hereditary ownership which supersedes any evaluation of his past record or of his basic character traits.

To the claims that arrange, inexperience, high-handedness, dictatorial procedure and the general inability to cooperate for the good of the whole would destroy the harmony of the institution as well as the morale of the student body, the Board of Directors has steadfastly opposed analysis of the institution's position. It has fled from its responsibilities in Rabbi Soloveitchik's record in Boston, which, if true, would disqualify a person from the influential position of teacher in any institution.

Board Receives Vilna
Considering the Board of Directors as the determining body in appointments, the A.H. informed the Board of his choice of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik as new president, immediately after the passing of Dr. Bernard Revel, of sainted memory. This notification was followed within a few days with an ultimatum to the Board that Rabbi Soloveitchik be chosen or the Yeshiva would suffer dire consequences. Resentment by the Directors resulted in rejection of the ultimatum, with a statement that the Board had not yet relinquished its authority of appointment to any outside organization.

With the death of Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik, the Agudath Horabonim demanded the immediate appointment of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik to the position of his father, refusing to consider qualifications or other candidates.

The establishment of a temporary board to administer the Yeshiva, pending the appointment of a possible permanent appointment, was bitterly resented by the A. H. It immediately began to sabotage the administration of Yeshiva affairs. During the week of March 2, it reached into the organization of Yeshiva by threats and intimidation in an attempt to force the resignation of the temporary committee and to cause student agitation for its candidate.

A "home camp" campaign threatening the Yeshiva with a "smear" campaign, which would destroy its position in American Orthodox life, in a final ultimatum to the Directors, the Agudath Horabonim gave Monday, March 17, as the date for the choice of Rabbi Soloveitchik. The Board has not officially indicated its intentions to accede to this demand. A "home camp" campaign has been initiated by the A. H., led by

(Continued on Page 3.)

Halachic Quarterly Projected At Inter-Faculty Board Meeting

Publication of an "Halachic Quarterly" which is to embrace the most comprehensive collection of Talmudical analysis and research was projected by the recently organized Inter-Faculty Council of Yeshiva. The periodical, regarded as a step towards establishing the status of Yeshiva as a world leading Torah institution, is to be edited by members of the faculty in collaboration with outstanding Talmudic scholars from all centers of Jewish learning, according to present plans.

The constitution of the Inter-Faculty Council which was formed shortly after the decease of Pres. Dr. Bernard Revel in order to deal with matters affecting the welfare of the institution and its students as a whole, has already been approved by several of the five faculties of Yeshiva, and its ratification by the rest is expected at the next meeting.

Annual Mixer Set For Sunday

An extensive program of fun and frolic for the Annual Student Faculty Mixer, to be held this Sunday, March 23, has been arranged to give the student an even chance in his battle of skill and skull with his instructors.

Preparations for this gala event have been organized by Professor Kenneth P. Dunson of the Speech department and Elvin Kosofsky '41, chairman of the social committee, that members of the faculty, disarmed of their red neck pencils and black books, are expected to completely refreshments, let down their hair, and go to town.

Leadership Class Begins Sessions

Successful leadership in club and group work based upon constructive guidance was the theme stressed by Kalman Levitan '36 at the initial meeting of the course in Club and Group Activities, Tuesday, March 11.

Discussing in detail the various age groups, their problems, desires and impulses, Mr. Levitan outlined the psychological and practical methods for the solution of such problems as inevitably confront group leaders.

In the second of the series of lectures, which took place last night, Mr. Levitan pointed out the fundamental differences in class and classroom procedure. Discussing briefly the objectives of the average club, the Young Israel official stressed the educational nature of the group as the most difficult to realize, after indicating that the social and athletic could be most easily achieved. He also announced that in line with the policy of the Group Leadership Course to provide practical experience for prospective leaders, students will engage in actual field work. Those interested in this aspect of the course will be assigned to assist in the direction and programming of established clubs at various Centers and Young Israel branches throughout the city.

As part of the intensive guidance program initiated by the Vocational Guidance Committee with the cooperation of the Young Israel, leading experts in this field have been invited to lecture at future meetings. Rabbi Philip Goodman of the 11th Street Institute, group organizer and chairman of the Jewish Welfare Board Committee on Camps will be the first speaker. Rabbi Goodman, who has distinguished himself in social and group

Epstein Eulogizes Joseph Trumpelder

Addressing the newly formed Betar group last Monday night in a crowded Executive social hall, Mr. Benesh Epstein, famous radio commentator and guest speaker for the evening, stressed the heroic and patient efforts of Joseph Trumpelder on behalf of the liberation of Palestine for the Jews.

After being introduced by Rabbi Gerson Appel '36, chairman for the evening, the speaker outlined the struggle waged by Trumpelder and the heroes of "Tel Chai" to extract the masses of Jews from spiritualistic miseries, and their final martyrdom in an attempt to establish a living and everlasting kingdom to Northern Palestine.

Proceeding the guest speaker was Noah Rosenblum '42, who delivered a stirring biographical sketch in Hebrew on Joseph Trumpelder. At his organizational meeting on Monday, a presentation was selected consisting of L. Marientrauer '41, in charge of organization, Rabbi Sholom Neuman, Gershen Appel, and E. Zapsky, H. Westphal, B. Poupko, and L. Devine.

The Commentator's front page assault on the Agudath ha-Rabbonim and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (19 March 1941).

Yeshiva is not, nor shall it ever be, the personal property of one single family or clique. It is the common domain of Orthodox Jewry, to which no private interest can ever lay claim. And not all the guns of the Agudath Ha-Rabonim or of its misguided "Hassidim" shall make us a party to turning the Yeshiva into a hopeless jungle of political intrigue.⁶⁹

Reactions on campus to the article came swiftly. A few hours after the edition hit the stands, school administrators sent a telegram to Levy, recommending the conditional hiring of Soloveitchik. Prior to that, administrators "had studiously avoided taking any position regarding" the appointment of Soloveitchik "on the ground that it is a problem affecting the internal organization of one of the departments of our institution, and not the entire institution." However, after the newspaper exposed the controversy, the administrators suggested to Levy that "it is apparent, even to the most casual observer that the question has gotten out of hand and is threatening to involve our Yeshiva in bitter controversies which will do no one any good." Administrators pointed out that Moses Soloveitchik, despite his title as senior *rosh yeshiva*, was in reality just like all other members of RIETS's Talmud faculty. "Although he was its outstanding member by virtue of prestige, scholarship and age," Moses Soloveitchik's position was "no different than that of any professor." Similarly, it was suggested that his son, Joseph, "be offered the position on the Talmud faculty occupied by his father for the past eleven years ... and that his activities and duties and obligations are not to extend beyond this prescribed limit."⁷⁰

To acknowledge their defeat in this matter, *The Commentator's* governing board dropped all coverage of politics surrounding Soloveitchik. The lone exception was a brief, muted blurb announcing the board of directors' invitation to two rabbis, Moses Rosen and Soloveitchik, to lecture as full-time *roshei yeshiva* at RIETS. Soloveitchik delivered his first lecture at Yeshiva in front of a packed lecture hall on 13 May 1941. Finally, after another two years of search committees and internal politics, Dr. Samuel Belkin, the dean of RIETS and Yeshiva College professor of Greek, was elected Yeshiva's second president. His commitment to empowering the modern-thinking, English-speaking rabbis of the Rabbinical Council of America severely weakened the Agudath ha-Rabbonim. Ironically, Belkin's agenda to elevate the RCA as American Orthodoxy's premier rabbinical group would have been impossible to actuate without Soloveitchik, who would mentor more than four decades of RIETS rabbis. In 1952, Soloveitchik accepted the chair of the RCA's Halakhah Commission, thereby irrevocably ending his political relationship with the Agudath ha-Rabbonim.⁷¹

While many were content to put the entire matter behind them, other students remained indignant over the events surrounding Soloveitchik's appointment. As head of the executive committee, Moses Isaacs published a response to *The Commentator's* opposition to the impending appointment in the following edition. Isaacs's letter scolded the editors and went a long way to silence them,

but discussions carried on in the dormitory hallways. This is more than evident from Student Council President Chanover's entry in the yearbook. Without making overt reference to the whole matter, Chanover, one of the most vocal students on this issue, praised the paper for keeping readers informed of turns of events and keeping up its noble fight. "Through its elected representatives and its organ, *The Commentator*," he wrote, "a guard of vigilance was maintained by the student body against the ever-increasing pressure of alien groups bent upon penetrating the Yeshiva organism."⁷²

All told, the episode served as a major setback for the newspaper's relationship with Yeshiva's administration, specifically with Isaacs. Officials no longer had faith that the paper would stay, with some room for sophomoric ranting, in tune with "what was best for the institution." What is more, the journalists had demonstrated, through their handling of the Soloveitchik affair, that despite the fact that the periodical was the official undergraduate newspaper of Yeshiva College only, they were willing to cover beats beyond the journalists' domain. And with a new era beginning under President Belkin, with more at stake for an expanding institution, the undergraduate journalists would soon find their freedom of the press further challenged.⁷³

Despite what Feuerstein and the other Yeshiva College journalists wrote in the 1936 yearbook, that "the underlying spirit of *The Commentator* consisted in a fundamental denial of the right of the administration to assume dictatorial power" over the student body, they nevertheless felt beholden to a culture that preached obedience to wiser and more experienced elders. Although the young journalists were wont to claim that the newspaper's goal was to promote "democracy inside as well as outside" Yeshiva College, the editors mostly accepted—however grudgingly—their responsibility to promote their institution, even if that meant sacrificing certain freedoms. In the ensuing years, however, editors grew incrementally more comfortable with their role as reporters and defenders of Yeshiva College students. Despite their recurrent indignation, *Commentator* editors reveled in this encounter and thrived because of it. This, then, as we trace American Judaism back to this time of radical adjustment, may well be the "real intellectual lives" of the first Yeshiva College undergraduates, the seedlings of modern Orthodoxy in America.

Zev Eleff is a Wexner Fellow—Davidson Scholar completing graduate studies at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Teachers College, Columbia University. He is the author of Living From Convention to Convention: A History of the NCSY, 1954–1980 and the editor of Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. He currently serves as the William Fischman Rabbinic Intern at The Jewish Center in Manhattan.

Notes

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¹Woodrow Wilson, "The Spirit of Learning," in *Representative Phi Beta Kappa Orations*, ed. Clark S. Northup, William C. Lane, and John C. Schwab (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 471.

²For a list of the campus newspapers Fass used, see Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 379.

³Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva: Higher Education, Orthodoxy, and American Judaism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 43–52; *Rabbinical College of America Register 5678 (1917–1918)* (New York, 1917), 9.

⁴Aaron Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Jewish Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), 79.

⁵For above quotation, see Irving Howe, *A Margin of Hope* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), 11. For a detailed halakhic analysis of the laws of *lashon hara* vis-à-vis its application to journalistic writing, see Zev Eleff, "On the Parameters of *Lashon Hara* in the Field of Journalism," *Beit Yitzhak* 39 (2007): 607–623.

⁶Zev Eleff, "What They Were Really Saying at YU in '48," *Kol Hamevaser* 1 (May 2008): 21–22.

⁷Michael Zylberman, "Concern From Afar: The Participation of 'Yeshiva' Students and Faculty in World War II Service and Holocaust Relief and Rescue Efforts, 1936–1947," *Chronos: The Journal of the Yeshiva University Historical Society* 1 (2000): 80–94.

⁸Ibid., 86. On American Jewry's lack of understanding of what was occurring in Europe, see Haskel Lookstein, *Were We Our Brothers' Keepers?: The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust, 1938–1944* (New York: Hartmore House, 1985); and Laurel Leff, *Buried by The Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁹For quotation, see "The Commentator," *Masmid* (1936): 48. It is interesting that while *rashei yeshiva* and other members of the rabbinic faculty probably took issue with many of the opinions in the student newspaper, they rarely responded publicly. It is possible that the rabbinic faculty at Yeshiva pulled students aside privately to discuss or even reprimand them for their opinions, however. This trend is consistent with members of the secular faculty at Yeshiva College who, by and large, did not submit letters to the editor until the end of the 1950s. Following suit, we find that *rashei yeshiva* did begin to grant interviews and express their criticisms of *The Commentator* by the start of the 1960s.

¹⁰For data on early Yeshiva College students, see Gurock, 272, n.50; and Jeffrey S. Gurock, "Jewish Commitment and Continuity in Interwar Brooklyn," in *Jews of Brooklyn*, ed. Ilana Abramovitch and Seán Galvin (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002), 238. For general statistics on Jewish enrollment in American colleges during the thirties, see Alfred Jospe, "Jewish College Students in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* 64 (1965): 131–145; Abraham D. Lavender, "Studies of Jewish College Students: A Review and a Replication," *Jewish Social Studies* 39 (winter/spring 1977): 37–52; and Arthur Liebman, *Jews and the Left* (New York: Wiley, 1979), 363–365.

¹¹Rothkoff, 189. For more perspective on university administrations during the Great Depression, see chapter four, “Two NYUs and ‘The Obligation of Universities to the Social Order’ in the Great Depression,” in David A. Hollinger’s *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹²Brief information on the establishment of clubs at Yeshiva College in the early 1930s can be found in corresponding *Masmid* yearbooks. Specifically on the quick growth of the international relations club, see *Masmid* (1934): 64–65. For discussion on Jewish students’ involvement in the rise of student activism in the 1930s, see Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 43.

¹³For discussion of student council’s innovations in student activities during the 1934–1935 academic year, see David W. Petegorsky, “What 1935 Has Done for Yeshiva College,” *Masmid* (1935): 54–56.

¹⁴See Victor B. Geller, *Orthodoxy Awakens: The Belkin Era and Yeshiva University* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2003), 89. For discussion of Talmudical Academy’s formation, see Seth D. Taylor, *Between Tradition and Modernity: A History of the Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy* (New York: Yeshiva University High School, 1991). For brief discussion of student activities and publications, see p. 14.

¹⁵For biographical information on Levine, see *The Commentator* (5 November 1958): 3.

¹⁶See “Rabbi Shimon Skopf,” *Hedenu* (30 December 1928): 1; “Who is Responsible,” *Hedenu* (April 1929): 1. For a good example of Levine’s more “newsy” version of the publication, see *Hedenu* (March 1932): 3.

¹⁷Julius Duscha and Thomas Fischer, *The Campus Press: Freedom and Responsibility* (Washington, DC: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1973), 9–11; and Frank Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 years, 1690–1940* (London: Routledge, 2000), 206. For the early history of the *Columbia Spectator*, see *Spectator’s Fifty Years: The Story of the Columbia Spectator from Its Founding in 1877 to the Present Time* (New York: Bracon Press, 1927). *The Harvard Crimson* was known as *The Magenta* until the school changed its school colors to crimson in 1885. For a history of Harvard’s student newspaper, see Michael Ryan, “A History of the Crimson over Its First Century at Harvard,” in *The Harvard Crimson Anthology: 100 Years at Harvard*, ed. Greg Lawless (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1980), 4–36. A final point of note: There is speculation as to whether the *Dartmouth Gazette* can be legitimately considered a newspaper. See Charles F. Thwing, *A History of Higher Education in America* (New York: Appelton, 1906), 389–390.

¹⁸“*Hedenu*—A New Policy,” *Hedenu* (Fall 1934): 4.

¹⁹“The Commentator,” *Masmid* (1935): 57. The article begins, “With the continued development of Yeshiva College and the phenomenal growth of student activities, it was merely a matter of time before a regular student publication would be woven into the pattern of Yeshiva student life. A few of the more interested students (Levine) had toyed with the idea in recent years, but it was not till the spring of 1935 that their dream became a reality.”

²⁰“The Commentator,” *Masmid* (1935): 57. The following profile appears to be an accurate description of Feuerstein during his college days: “[Feuerstein] is one of the political bosses of the school. The only election he ever lost was when he ran for president of the Junior Class (pardon the chuckles). Moe is at present the benevolent despot of this dynamic journal. His current vocations are Hapoel HaMizrachi, *The Commentator*, and the D.N.A., of which he is organizer. Excels in French, Sociology and Public Speaking.” “Meet the Seniors,” *The Commentator* (5 March 1936): 2. For nearly two decades, *The Commentator* printed a back page advertisement from Chesterfield Cigarettes that, more often than not, depicted scantily clad women. It is surprising that there were no letters to the editor objecting to the ads. However, the editors acknowledged at least once their awareness that some felt the ads were inappropriate for a Yeshiva College publication. See “Editorial Notebook,” *The Commentator* (26 February 1942): 4.

²¹Letters to the editor, *The Commentator* (1 March 1935): 2.

²²“Farewell,” *The Commentator* (20 May 1936): 2. For reflection on the first five years of the newspaper’s publication and quotation, see “5 Years of Commentator Described in Retrospect,” *The Commentator* (28 February 1940): 1.

²³“Farewell,” *The Commentator* (20 May 1936): 2.

²⁴The first edition to be printed in a five-column format was the 8 April 1935 issue. On the Hebrew curriculum, see “Yeshiva College Offers Course in Teaching General Methods of Hebrew,” *The Commentator* (1 May 1935): 1. For an editorial on Orthodoxy’s lack of involvement in Zionist activities, see “How Long Will Orthodoxy Slumber?” on page 2 of the same edition. For the editors’ opposition to a business program, see “Let ’Em Eat Cake,” *The Commentator* (6 May 1935): 2.

²⁵William D. Kaufman, “Letters to the editor,” *The Commentator* (9 April 1959): 2.

²⁶“Looking Backward,” *The Commentator* (20 May 1935): 2.

²⁷David W. Petegorsky, “What 1935 Has Done for Yeshiva College,” *Masmid* (1935): 55. Petegorsky, a native of Ottawa, graduated as Yeshiva College’s 1935 valedictorian. A year later, he received ordination from RIETS. In 1940 he received his doctorate in political science from the London School of Economics and accepted a teaching position at Antioch College. In 1945, at age thirty, Petegorsky was selected to be the executive director of the American Jewish Congress, a position he held for ten years before his untimely death on 15 July 1956. Petegorsky spent a lifetime serving the Jewish community and wrote extensively on political science, publishing two books and contributing articles to many academic journals. For more discussion on Petegorsky, one of Yeshiva College’s most prominent early alumni, and further information on his family life, see *The David W. Petegorsky Memorial Chair in Political Science Dedication Journal* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1961).

²⁸“A Step Forward,” *The Commentator* (24 October 1935): 2.

²⁹*Jewish Advocate* (14 December 1935). For a larger discussion of Yeshiva athletics at this time, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “The Beginnings of Team Torah u-Madda: Sports and the Mission of an Americanized Yeshivah, 1916–1940,” *Torah u-Madda Journal* 14 (2006–2007): 157–172.

³⁰For evidence of the Feuersteins’ connection to Revel, see letter from Revel to Mr. Samuel C. Feuerstein, 25 December 1935, Bernard Revel Papers, Correspondence Folder “F,” Yeshiva University Archives, New York. For a reader’s criticism of *The Commentator*’s editorial policies, see Dizzy E. Dean, letter to the editor, *The Commentator* (8 April 1935): 2.

³¹Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel*, 82. For a valuable discussion of Safir’s tenure and accomplishments at MTA, see Taylor, *Between Tradition*, 40–45. For Safir’s own account of the history of Yeshiva College, see Shelley R. Saphire, “Beginnings and Early Life of Yeshiva College,” *Jewish Forum* (April 1954): 52–54. It should be noted that Safir seems to have changed the spelling of his family name sometime after resigning from the deanship of Yeshiva College.

³²See “Censorship,” *The Commentator* (24 October 1935): 2. The journalists continued to receive news updates from Hartstein even after Revel’s death. See letter from Eita Angel to *The Commentator*, 28 November 1944, Yeshiva University Public Relations Collection, Box 7, Folder 4–27, Yeshiva University Archives, New York.

³³Rothkoff, 196.

³⁴“Dean Safir Charged as Unfit for Office; Student Council Orders Immediate Probe of Indictments,” *The Commentator* (19 March 1936): 1. For the governing board’s politically sensitive position on the issue, see “The Safir Investigation—A Plea for Fair Play,” *The Commentator* (19 March 1936): 2.

³⁵“List of Charges,” u.d., Shelley R. Safir Papers, Box 30, Folder 1–17, Yeshiva University Archives, New York.

³⁶Letter from Moses L. Isaacs to Dr. S.R. Safir, 11 May 1936, Shelley R. Safir Papers, Box 30, Folder 1–17, Yeshiva University Archives, New York.

³⁷“Composite ‘Lordly Senior’ Endorses Commentator; Would Immediately Resign if Proffered Deanship,” *The Commentator* (20 May 1936): 1.

³⁸For figures of funds allocated by student council to various student activities, see “Council Makes Grants of \$238 in First Meeting,” *The Commentator* (7 November 1935): 1. In 1935, the library fund received the highest allocation from student council, one hundred dollars, followed by the loan fund’s sixty-three dollars. The newspaper, chess team, and concert bureau were each allocated fifteen dollars.

³⁹For quotations and the first detailed discussion of the Reed Harris saga, see James Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1935), 108–120. See also Cohen, 22–41; Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 61; and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 165–166. Although it received far less publicity than Harris and *The Spectator*, City College’s undergraduate newspaper, *The Campus*, stirred its readers and college administration as early as the late 1920s. Owing to the fact that 85 percent of students enrolled in City College at that time were Jewish, one may assume that early *Commentator* editors knew someone connected or familiar with the irreverent journalists there. See A.L. Shands, “The Cheder on the Hill: Some Notes on C.C.N.Y.,” *The Menorah Journal* 16 (March 1929): 264–265. For the expulsion of twenty-one CCNY students after a campus publication levied heavy criticism on the president of the college in 1933, see Cohen, 108–118.

⁴⁰The earlier 1930s account is from Wechsler, 118. For the later testimony of *The Spectator*, see Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 142.

⁴¹See “Gabriel To Be Editor of Commentator for Next Year; New Governing Board Chosen for Student Publication,” *The Commentator* (6 May 1936): 1.

⁴²See “Five Year Plan Begun with Freshman Class,” *The Commentator* (13 October 1936): 1. For Gabriel’s insistence on a dean of good ideals and character, see “Definition of a Dean,” *The Commentator* (13 October 1936): 2.

⁴³“Council Denounces Imposing of Five Year Plan Upon Freshmen, Demands Class Graduate in 1940,” *The Commentator* (16 December 1936): 1.

⁴⁴“Bungling at the Start,” *The Commentator* (16 December 1936): 2.

⁴⁵For student council’s rejection of the revised plan, see “Council Rejects Five Year Plan; New Version Held Meaningless,” *The Commentator* (30 December 1936): 1. As mentioned earlier, the journalists backed student government completely. For example, see “An Absurd Concoction,” *The Commentator* (30 December 1936): 2.

⁴⁶See “Council Votes Committee for Aid in Planning,” *The Commentator* (6 January 1937): 1. See also “A Welcome Opportunity” on page 2 of the same edition.

⁴⁷“In Retrospect,” *The Commentator* (26 May 1937): 2.

⁴⁸Message from the President,” *Masmid* (1937): 68.

⁴⁹Letter from Bernard Revel to President Moses L. Isaacs, 12 November 1936, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 21, Folder 3–15, Yeshiva University Archives, New York. For Dr. Revel’s struggle to keep the institution afloat at this time, see Rothkoff, 181–203.

⁵⁰Regarding the newspaper’s take on its own place in student politics and university politics, see “Examining the Issues,” *The Commentator* (19 May 1937): 2.

⁵¹For relevant literature on alumni and student demands for a dean, see “Dean Demanded by Alumni Quarterly,” *The Commentator* (17 November 1937): 1; and “Needed—Now,” *The Commentator* (17 November 1937): 2. All told, the newspaper’s quality and coverage under A. Leo Levin was not on par with his predecessors, as Levin admitted in print. See “Levin, Miller, Appel Urge Co-operation At Student Meeting,” *The Commentator* (8 December 1937): 1.

⁵²See “Alumni Recommend Dr. Isaacs for Dean,” *The Commentator* (5 January 1938): 1; “Hand In Hand,” *The Commentator* (5 January 1938): 2. For Isaacs’s official appointment, see “Dr. Isaacs Appointed Assistant to Pres.,” *The Commentator* (12 January 1938): 1; and “The Basis for Success,” *The Commentator* (12 January 1938): 2.

⁵³For example, see “Cooperation Will Bring Success,” *The Commentator* (2 March 1938): 2; and “No Time for Sabotage,” *The Commentator* (18 January 1949): 2.

⁵⁴“Dr. Revel Leaves for Vacation in Florida,” *The Commentator* (16 February 1938): 1.

⁵⁵“A Refuah Shlemah,” *The Commentator* (27 November 1940): 2. The final years and days of Revel’s life are captured in Rothkoff, 204–224.

⁵⁶On connection between the Agudath ha-Rabbonim’s administration and RIETS, see Rothkoff, 143–144; Gurock, *Men and Women of Yeshiva*, 122–126. For a larger portrait of the operations of the Agudath ha-Rabbonim, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Resisters and Accommodators: Varieties of Orthodox Rabbis in America, 1886–1983,” *American Jewish Archives Journal* 35 (November 1983): 100–187; reprinted in Jeffrey S. Gurock, *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1996), 1–62.

⁵⁷Letter from Rabbi I. Rosenberg, Rabbi E.L. Silver, Rabbi B.L. Levinthal to Hon. Samuel Levy, 3 December 1940; and letter from Samuel Levy to Rabbis I. Rosenberg, E.L. Silver, and B.L. Levinthal, 4 December 1940, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 1–60, Yeshiva University Archives, New York. Reproductions of the above letters and others similar are printed in Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Silver Era in American Jewish Orthodoxy: Rabbi Eliezer Silver and His Generation* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1981), 265–271. For Levy’s perspective on Orthodox Judaism and Yeshiva at this time, see Samuel Levy, “The Future of Judaism,” *Jewish Forum* 23 (December 1940): 175–176.

⁵⁸Rakeffet-Rothkoff, 266–267. The student council of RIETS, Student Organization of Yeshiva, offered its support to Levy, also. See letter from Student Organization of Yeshiva to Hon. Samuel Levy, 5 December 1940, Bernard Revel Papers, Box 5, Folder 1–60, Yeshiva University Archives, New York. Regarding the candidates and politics of finding a replacement for Revel, see Gurock, *Men and Women of Yeshiva*, 128–141; and Gilbert Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University: The First Jewish University in America* (London: Macmillan Co., 1969), 171–177. Also see Joseph Lookstein, “The Making of a President for Yeshiva University,” 1940–1943, Personal Account, u.d. Joseph H. Lookstein Papers, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun Archive, New York. For a source that alludes to a contradicting account to the one provided by Lookstein, see David Holzer, *The Rav Thinking Aloud: Transcripts of Personal Conversations with Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Miami Beach, 2009), 44–45.

⁵⁹“Yeshiva Is One,” *The Commentator* (8 January 1941): 2.

⁶⁰Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman, *The Soloveitchik Heritage: A Daughter’s Memoir* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1995), 251. For a brief profile of Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik, see Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1999), 8–11; and Isaac Raphael, *Encyclopedia of Religious Zionism* 4 (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1958), 87–89.

⁶¹“Thousands Pay Last Tribute to Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik,” *The Commentator* (7 February 1941): 1.

⁶²See Rakeffet-Rothkoff, 267–268. Interestingly, shortly before his death, Revel agreed to establish a satellite rabbinical school in Boston under the aegis of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. See “Memorandum of Agreement,” Bernard Revel Papers, Box 7, Folder 3–33, Yeshiva University Archives, New York. A discussion of Soloveitchik’s failed candidacy for Yeshiva’s presidency can be found in Seth Farber, “The Appointment of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik to Rosh Yeshiva of RIETS and the Arrival of American Orthodoxy,” in *Yeshivot u-Batei Midrashot*, ed. Immanuel Erkes (Jerusalem: Mercatz Zalman Shazar, 2006), 417–429.

⁶³On Rabbi Soloveitchik's early struggle within the Boston community, see Seth Farber, "Reproach, Recognition and Respect: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Orthodoxy's Mid-Century Attitude Toward Non-Orthodox Denominations," *American Jewish History* 89 (June 2001): 193–214.

⁶⁴"Feuerstein Urges Student Unity to Meet Impending Crisis," *The Commentator* (5 March 1941): 1. Ironically, the Feuerstein family later became great supporters and close friends of Rabbi Soloveitchik and his family in Boston. See Mordecai Feuerstein, "The Rov *zt*": The *Nigleh* and the *Nistar*," in *Mentor of Generations: Reflections on Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Zev Eleff (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2008), 250–251. See also Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 57. Be that as it may, Feuerstein's role in the episode was not as easily forgotten by Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein, as both men continued to be influential in the continuing search for Yeshiva's second president. See Lookstein, "The Making of a President;" and Joseph H. Lookstein to Samuel Levy, 24 November 1943, Samuel Levy Correspondence, 1939–1944, Joseph H. Lookstein Papers, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun Archive, New York.

⁶⁵"A Future At Stake," *The Commentator* (5 March 1941): 2.

⁶⁶No doubt, the journalists did not question Feuerstein's claims. After all, to the editors, he was one of them. In fact, by submitting a letter to the paper for the last issue of every spring semester wherein he ceremoniously congratulated the incoming governing board for carrying on his "fight for a better and still better Yeshiva College," Feuerstein created a sort of extended fraternity for past and present editors.

⁶⁷See "Agudath Horabonim Attempting 'Smear' Campaign Against Yeshiva," *The Commentator* (19 March 1941): 1; and Geller, 63–65. Although *The Commentator* rarely provided bylines until much later, it did include one—just the initials, "Y.B.I."—under this article. These initials do not match any graduate of Yeshiva from 1935 to 1945. However, as this was a much-discussed article even ten years after the episode, it was well known to students that Leonard Rosenfeld was the key writer. Author interview with Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet, 15 September 2008. See also Joseph Kaminetsky, *Memorable Encounters* (Brooklyn: Shaar Press, 1995), 51–53.

⁶⁸"We Speak Our Piece," *The Commentator* (19 March 1941): 2.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Letter to Mr. Samuel Levy, 19 March 1941, Samuel Sar Papers, Box 30, Folder 14–44, Yeshiva University Archives, New York. The Soloveitchik family also took personally *The Commentator's* coverage of the rabbi. See Meiselman, 256.

⁷¹"Two Rabbis Accept Posts As Senior Roshe Yeshiva," *The Commentator* (30 April 1941): 1. On Rabbi Soloveitchik's inaugural lecture, see "The First Lecture at Yeshiva," *ha-Pardes* (June 1941): 11. On the various posts Soloveitchik held, see Aaron Lichtenstein, "Joseph Soloveitchik," in *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Simon Noveck (Washington, DC: B'nai B'rith Books, 1985), 285–286.

⁷²Hyman Chanover, "Message from the President," *Masmid* (1941): 66.

⁷³See Moses Legis Isaacs, letters to the editor, *The Commentator* (2 April 1941): 2. As a postscript, it would not be long before student leaders, and their newspaper in particular, changed their minds about Rabbi Soloveitchik and duly fought for his cause. On page two of *The Commentator's* 4 November 1943 edition, editor-in-chief Paul Orentlicher penned an article titled, "The Case of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik." This time, the journalists would be the ones to defend Soloveitchik against his critics. In fewer than two years, Soloveitchik had earned "proper devotion, support and enthusiasm by his students." Despite this, administrators claimed they lacked the funds necessary to employ their teacher as a full-time *rosh yeshiva*. Crediting him with uncanny ability and vision, Orentlicher pleaded for President Belkin to act decisively: "Is it too much to ask that the Yeshiva maintain as its own a man who can become one of the foremost exponents of Orthodox Judaism, a man who can defend vigorously the philosophy of Orthodoxy against all its enemies, within and without?" RIETS's student council, Student Organization of the Yeshiva, supported the editors. With rumors circulating that after receiving an offer from the

Hebrew Theological Seminary in Skokie, Illinois, Soloveitchik was “seriously considering resignation,” students petitioned Belkin and the board of directors to wield “influence to prevent the grievous loss with Rabbi Soloveitchik’s resignation would entail.” In this campaign, the student newspaper was successful. One of the most influential figures of twentieth-century American Jewry, Soloveitchik would serve as at RIETS for more than four decades. See also, “Rabbi Soloveitchik,” *The Commentator* (16 November 1944): 2.