

A House Divided

What happens to Modern Orthodox families when teens come back from Israel more observant than their parents?

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One undercurrent of the Eдах conference was the generation gap among Modern Orthodox families. It is characterized by increased ritual observance and Torah study on the part of young people who have spent a post-high school year of religious study at an Israeli yeshiva or seminary more fundamentalist than their family's lifestyle.

At two sessions dealing with the frequent tensions created in families as a result of this religious divide, parents complained about their lack of control over their impressionable teen's lives. But young men and women spoke of the positive impact of a year in Israel devoted to self-evaluation and serious textual study.

"I see no gray in him," one parent said of his young adult son. "These kids see everything in black and white," he complained. He and other parents spoke of changes they found in their returning children, and of the pressure Israeli yeshivas put on their sons and daughters to dress more modestly, eschew social contact with the opposite sex, and devote more time to prayer and Torah study, at the expense

of secular studies. Some yeshivas urge the American students not to attend secular college upon their return, but rather to remain in yeshiva for another year or attend Yeshiva University in New York.

Miriam Schacter, a psychotherapist who led one of the sessions, said that a central theme for family conflict is when young people return from Israel disinterested in the secular world. "They no longer want secular ideas to have a significant influence in their lives," she said, and often criticize their parents for being "hypocritical and materialistic."

An important factor to consider, she said, is that "young adults can use precisely these religious issues to express their general conflict with and anger at their parents."

While several parents expressed frustration with their lack of sufficient information about the yeshivas their sons and daughters attended, others spoke of how impressed they were with the spiritual and moral growth of their children, who had outpaced them in terms of Torah knowledge and, some said, ethical behavior as well.

At a session on the younger generation's views of Modern Orthodoxy, three speakers emphasized the positive value of their year in Israel and the need to be self-confident enough to fend off pressure from some religious teachers there.

Joshua Fogel, an engineering student at Columbia University, described both the Israeli yeshiva and the U.S. college campus experiences as "a tidal wave of culture that can sweep you away." He said he found keeping a daily journal of his thoughts in Israel "an anchor" of stability.

Beth Samuels, a graduate of Columbia and student at DriSha, a center for Judaic studies for women in New York, resisted pressure from her Israeli teachers who urged her not to attend the March of the Living in Poland because it was coed. She said she was bolstered by support from her parents, with whom she spoke often during her year in Israel. "That year shouldn't be seen as the year for forming all your views," she cautioned.

Eric Weisberg, a graduate of Yeshiva University now working for Eдах, urged parents and high school teachers to help prepare young people for the kinds of issues they will need to deal with in Israel. He said some students view the Israeli yeshiva experience as "a mikveh that will cleanse all their problems."

Several people voiced the hope that Eдах will help create yeshiva programs in Israel more consistent with the Modern Orthodox views the group espouses. □

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