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How Yeshiva University tries to balance ‘yeshiva’ and ‘university’

Steven Fine ⁝⁝ 9/22/2022

(RNS) — Recently I was invited by the hosts of a podcast called “Talking Tachlis,” whose audience is the Modern Orthodox Jewish community, to discuss the multimedia exhibition I curated at the Museum of the Bible about the Samaritans, the living relatives of the “good Samaritan” from the New Testament parable and today a “micropeople” of 862 members with a rich and ancient history that far outweighs its small size.

As we talked about how Samaritans interacted with their Jewish cousins since biblical times, and later with Christians and Muslims, the hosts mentioned that the previous week’s episode focused on the ongoing controversies at Yeshiva University, where I teach. The university has been fighting, first in the New York state courts and then in the U.S. Supreme Court, to refuse to recognize a club for LGBTQ students. The podcast hosts expressed their angst and deep discomfort at the way this delicate issue has been handled by our administration.

One of the hosts expressed real cognitive dissonance between the Samaritans exhibition and the LGBTQ controversy. The Samaritans’ story is an inspiring one of faith, perseverance and serious work toward reconciliation. Most of all, it is a human story of real people and their unique, ancient and endangered

culture. The exhibition, too, reflects Yeshiva at its best: curious, inviting, earnest, intellectually rigorous, complex and deeply kind. It epitomizes the search for cultural synthesis — the capacity to be both “Modern” and “Orthodox,” that is at the heart of the university’s mission.

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She was right that Yeshiva’s stance on the LGBTQ club and our intellectual and cultural openness don’t line up. Truth is, I feel it too, and it hurts.

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It is tough to be both a yeshiva and a university. Yeshivas and other purely religious institutions are meant to weather cultural change, to meld the present and the past into a tapestry of continuity. Modern universities are about new ideas, change and more subtle Western traditions of “universality.” Putting the two together into a single institution can create fissures and disagreements that go to the core of what it means to be either a yeshiva — a place for the study of Torah and rabbinical training — or a university.

From the school’s start, more than a century ago, the balance between “university” and “yeshiva” has been a precarious one. Beginning as an amalgam of the then Yiddish-speaking Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary; the Religious Zionist Teachers College, with its Hebrew-language orientation; and the all-male “Yeshiva College,” the university has grown into the flagship institution of Modern Orthodoxy.

Each of Yeshiva’s contemporary array of schools and programs positions itself in relation to the yeshiva ideal or university ideal. Within each program, multiple voices can be heard, with endless variations on what it means to be both a yeshiva and a university. It is a rich and enriching, if precarious, cacophony.

Every generation or so, this experiment in community building reaches a crisis point. In 1967 YU changed its charter to appear secular enough to receive government funding, which included spinning off the yeshiva — the seminary — as an “affiliate.” This difficult decision was taken after the state of New York excluded religious institutions from receiving direct institutional aid that it made available to independent colleges and universities.

The legendary Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik argued strenuously against this change on ideological grounds. Yeshiva’s president at the time, Rabbi Samuel Belkin, desperate for funds to fuel Yeshiva’s postwar expansion, changed the charter.

Gyration between YU’s university and sectarian identities grew swifter in subsequent decades, such that Belkin’s successor as president, Rabbi Norman Lamm, formed this complexity into an ideology that he called

Torah u-Maddah, loosely translated “Judaism and Secular Wisdom.”

By making the complexities explicit, Lamm helped the Yeshiva community deal with the inherent contradictions of being both “modern” and “orthodox.” The Torah u-Maddah ideal demands that undergrads, rabbis and, recently, women leaders be both talmedei hahamim (“rabbinic scholars”) and first-class academics. Male leaders strive for the dual title “Rabbi Doctor” as a sign of status.

The balance imagined by Lamm was enriching for the elite whom he groomed. Others struggled with their commitments in different ways — some focusing more on the yeshiva, others on the university. The goal of YU administrations before and since Lamm has been to maintain the precarious balance, keep all sides happy and offend the fewest number of people.

The current crisis regarding our LGBTQ+ students is not a new one. The issue has festered at the core of YU’s identity crisis for decades. What is new is the very public and emotional nature of the dispute, and the international coverage it has evoked. All of a sudden, YU is at the center of America’s divisive culture war.

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We’re not alone. Many intentionally religious, first-tier universities and their constituencies are adapting to being the new culture battleground. We shall see what this war does to the very souls of institutions and communities like mine.

With God’s help — and with wise leadership and empathy on all sides — our current communal crisis will soon be healed and an amicable balance restored.

(Steven Fine is the Churgin Professor of Jewish History at Yeshiva University, director of the university’s Center for Israel Studies and its Israelite Samaritans Project. The views expressed in this commentary do not necessarily reflect those of Religion News Service.)