

Sichas Chullin Shel Talmidei Chachamim Tzricha Talmud

—Avoda Zara 19b

An Interview with Rabbi Yona Reiss

Max and Marion Grill Dean, RIETS



CHAVRUSA: Prior to coming to RIETS you had successful careers as a lawyer and the menahel of the Beth Din. Describe what prompted you to make these career decisions, of the three which was the most challenging, and if you feel that each position naturally led to the next?

Like many students, I was not really sure what I wanted to do when I grew up. I attended MTA for high school and Yeshiva College, with summers in the Morasha Kollel. Like many ambivalent individuals, I enrolled in law school. I loved learning so I pursued both a rabbinical degree and a law degree. I wanted to be a Torah scholar and teach, but also believed in the value of a professional degree and I enjoyed the practice of law. Along the way, I picked up an interest in *dayanus* because I felt frustrated that in law school, I was researching the minutiae of legal texts from a secular context when there was such a wealth of material on Jewish law. I wanted to delve at least as diligently into the tomes of *Choshen Mishpat* as I did with respect to the law books lining the legal libraries. My roommate went on to a *dayanus* post studying at Eretz Chemda in Israel. After practicing law for a few years, I enrolled in the *Yadin Yadin* program while keeping my job at my law firm. The law practice became increasingly demanding and it was hard to keep up with my *dayanus* studies. I took a leave of absence from the firm to study full time. During that year I learned with Rabbi Michael Broyde '93R, who had been recruited from his position as a law professor at Emory to be the

director of the Beth Din of America. He asked me to assist him and I readily did; at the end of the year when he returned to Atlanta, I was asked to assume the position of director of the Beth Din. For a few years I remained part time with my firm, but when the Beth Din work became too busy, I focused exclusively upon the Beth Din. My work at the Beth Din was a fulfillment of all of my interests, kept me in *avodas hakodesh* and allowed me to use my legal abilities for arbitration and mediation. After engaging in that position, it occurred to me that in order to strengthen the influence and vigor of the Beth Din, it was important to develop a stronger affiliation with the *Yadin Yadin Kollel*, where Rabbi Willig '71R, who serves as the *segan av beth din* for the Beth Din, is the *segan rosh kollel*, and where Rabbi Broyde and I had studied. I initiated conversations with President Joel regarding formalizing a relationship between the Beth Din and the *Yadin Yadin Kollel*. The development of that proposal led to my having regular conversations with the president; during those conversations President Joel informed me that Rabbi Charlop '54R would be assuming a new role and he asked me to consider the position of dean of RIETS. I came to the realization that this position would be a wonderful opportunity to continue to use my abilities to contribute meaningfully to Klal Yisrael, including the ability to train future rabbonim, *poskim* and *dayanim*. During the years at the Beth Din I also served for five years as the *rosh kollel* for a summer YU kollel in Atlanta which gave me the opportunity to teach YU students and hone my pedagogical skills.

CHAVRUSA: As a talmid of the Yeshiva, who were your rebbeim? How will your experience as a talmid here affect your vision for the Yeshiva?

In high school my *rebbeim* were Rabbi Cohen '65R, Rabbi Yaged '61R and Rabbi Hecht '64R. I went early admissions to Yeshiva College and enrolled in the shiur of Rabbi Willig, who was familiar to me from my summers at Morasha. After a year in Shaalvim, I wanted to learn on my own; I happened to sit in on Rav Schachter's '67R shiur. I fell in love with his shiur and ended up transfixed in his shiur until I finished *semikhah*. I actually would attend shiur during my days off from law school and always sought to obtain tapes of his shiurim whenever I could. I grew up in Monsey with Rav Tendler '48R as my *mara d'asra*, and count him as well as a rebbe of mine.

Every now and then as a student I would look around and say, "I would love to do things this way or that way." It's especially exciting for me now to be able to actualize those dreams. Of course, this has always been a wonderful and excellent yeshiva. The proof is how well the yeshiva has blossomed in terms of students, *batei midrashim*, *kollelim*, *shiurim*, and programs over the last number of decades. I am privileged to have been mentored by my incredible predecessor, Rabbi Zevulun Charlop. Part of my job is to make sure that we continue to thrive. We have succeeded in adjusting to changing needs and changing times for the student body and the Jewish community in general. It's important for me to have an open, warm and transparent office environment

where the processes are clear and honored. As we expand there are more issues with which to grapple, including being technologically savvy, and comporting with the professional standards required in contemporary times. The fact that we unveiled a new and revised RIETS web site has been applauded by our students. I try to maintain an open-door policy in my office, so the *talmidim* can feel comfortable coming to the office any time, to share their reflections, thoughts and concerns. I've also emphasized the need to generate a positive environment. I recollect, unfortunately, from my student days a certain environment of cynicism and defensiveness; there was an insufficient feeling of appreciation and awareness of being in what I consider the best yeshiva on earth. There was really no reason not to have that energy, spirit, enthusiasm and optimism. I've seen much of that improve under the leadership of President Joel. I feel it's vital to inject positive feelings and self-esteem and an appreciation of how fantastic an institution we are in terms of combining Torah erudition and sophistication with an awareness and appreciation of the world around us.

CHAVRUSA: In your new position, you will be coordinating the religious life and culture on campus. What steps are you taking to enhance the rebbe-talmid relationship and the warmth of the environment?

There were a number of programs I discovered when I came to Yeshiva which were all excellent and promising, but which were spread out in different places and needed to be coordinated. We had a *sgan mashgichim* program, to enable students to have more of a bond with individuals looking after their spiritual welfare – in addition to their *rebbeim*; we had *shoelim umaishivim* all around the *beis medrash* to answer questions. We had shiur assistants who helped facilitate connections between rebbe and talmid in shiur; we had a *hadracha* — big brother program for each shiur where the older students mentored the younger students. None of these initiatives truly connected with one another. One of my first tasks was to identify all of these pieces that were related to the aim of my office and properly coordinate them. Rabbi Elisha Bacon '01R was coordinating the *sgan mashgiach* positions and I expanded his portfolio to also oversee the administration of these other programs. This way there is a multi-layered mentoring process coordinated through the RIETS office. We've also established a more regular series of *rebbe-*

talmid lunch meetings. In connection with the new Glueck Center, every single *shiur* will be allocated a space in the *beis medrash* and each *rosh yeshiva* will be seated near his *shiur*, so he can be more accessible to his *talmidim* during *sefer*. We instituted a program this past semester where every Rosh Yeshiva attended night *sefer* for an entire week, a practice that will continue this next year. Basically we are establishing mechanisms and infrastructure to enable stronger bonds between *rebbe* and *talmid* and better resource systems for *talmidim* in general to communicate with their *rebbeim* and other mentors and counselors so no one is left without assistance. This is tricky in an institution as big as ours. But our burgeoning size is a welcome challenge.

CHAVRUSA: As head of all Judaic studies, how will you manage RIETS as a makom Torah for those seeking a yeshiva atmosphere and simultaneously, cater to our talmidim who see Judaic studies as more of an academic requirement?

A variety of undergraduate Judaic studies programs have always been offered to our diverse student body. Each program plays a vital and important role, be it the Mazer Yeshiva Program, the traditional yeshiva program; BMP, the Stone Beis Medrash Program, also a traditional yeshiva program for students with greater time constraints; the Isaac Breuer College, intended to be an academic Jewish studies college program; and finally the Mechina program, intended to address the needs of our students with less strong backgrounds in Jewish studies prior to matriculation. We made one important change which is historic in the history of Yeshiva. We now have all four programs coordinated under one centralized office to create a more cohesive environment for the Yeshiva, so all students will feel that they are part of one unified yeshiva. During orientation, we now run "Open House" as one yeshiva, rather than as separate units. This past year, we had "In-Shabbos" programs where 500 – 600 students remained on campus, some of the largest numbers in history to participate in the Shabbos program. My wife and I were on campus for such a Shabbos and looked around the cafeteria at the multitude of *talmidim*, from different backgrounds representing different programs and different hashkafos, all singing *zemiros* together. My wife turned to me and said, "Wow, this really is a yeshiva!" I thought this was a very telling comment that captured the perspective of the RIETS

It's vital to inject an appreciation of how fantastic an institution we are in terms of combining Torah erudition and sophistication with an awareness and appreciation of the world around us.

office. The presence of college programs, graduates programs, teams, clubs and other cultural realities does not diminish our presence of being a yeshiva; it enhances the yeshiva environment by accentuating the ideology that one's entire life experience can and should remain centered in the *olam hayeshiva*. Even one's pursuit of secular studies and professional education is ultimately grounded in a Torah environment suffused with *yirat shamayim*. This is what is what makes our yeshiva unique and the experience here instructive for preparing our students to build professional careers, families and communities grounded in Torah values.

CHAVRUSA: How will you divide the responsibilities and talmidim between the various batei midrash?

The introduction of the Glueck *beis medrash* is one of the most exciting challenges of my job. I'm looking forward to it and I hope that we anticipate all of the challenges. We will have a new two-level *beis medrash* of over 500 seats and new faculty offices to enable our *roshei yeshiva* to meet and counsel our *talmidim*. We have B'H enough *shiurim* and *talmidim* to warrant this new *beis medrash* facility, in addition to the existing four *batei medrash* (Zysman Hall, Klein Hall, Furst Hall and Morgenstern). We have assembled a few committees to focus on all aspects of integration into the Glueck Center. Naturally, the integration is a work in progress. We have ordered *seforim* for the new *beis*

medrash and are in the process of cataloging them. The new RIETS administrative offices will be on the sixth (top) floor of the building; we will have satellite beth din space where talmidim training in the *kollel l'horaaah* will have hands on training for *dayanut*. Determining the appropriate use of all of the different *batei midrash* and related facilities will obviously be a major and exciting focus of our planning for this upcoming semester.

CHAVRUSA: This coming academic year is a big one for RIETS: opening a new *beis medrash*, a RIETS dinner and a *Chag Hasemikhah*. Obviously, RIETS will be on a platform this year. How do you see the *semikhah* program changing in the next five years? What are your goals for Rabbinic Alumni?

We successfully set up two committees of *roshei yeshiva* this past year. First, the *machzor* committee, which devised the *sefer halimud* for the coming years, including some exciting innovations such as a yeshiva-wide study of *Maseches Yevamos*, which is slated for two years from now. The second committee is the *Semikhah* Curriculum Review committee, which has performed a wholesale review of the *semikhah* curriculum, canvassing ideas from both *talmidim* and *roshei yeshiva*. Our goal is to create responsive approaches to the various challenges that have confronted us over the years including making the program a more cohesive experience, with the articulation of yearly expectations during the program. We also resurrected the RIETS component of the YU press. We appointed R. Daniel Feldman to coordinate the Yeshiva press to take advantage of all the talent that we have here – *roshei yeshiva* and other Torah personalities – so it will have a more lasting impact on the community, who thirst for the Torah of our faculty. We are in the process of finalizing a revised YU *Hagaddah*, a Tanach project, and other *seforim* of *halakha*, *hashkafa* and *chidushei Torah* of our *roshei yeshiva*.

There is such an important role for our alumni to play, be they in the pulpit, *chinuch*, chaplaincy, outreach, communal positions, and even our well-trained and learned lay people. Our *semikhah* program represents the gold standard of excellence. I am not only referring to erudition and scholarship, which remain the most important emphasis of our *semikha* program. We are also producing professionally qualified, sensitive and decent individuals who have received, through our pro-

fessional rabbinic training program, the requisite professional skills to serve as community leaders. Our emphasis has to be outward and community-oriented because the world is dependant upon us. We also have to pay more attention to our leadership role and responsibility in Eretz Yisrael which is becoming the demographic center for world Jewry; there is a tremendous need for the Yeshiva University ideology and vision there. We need to continue to discharge our role in terms of community development and reinforcement in all the Jewish communities in North America and elsewhere in the Diaspora. In that sense, maintaining the connection with our rabbinic graduates, giving them continued programming, and making them a part of the conversation with our current students is a vital part of our mission moving forward. One of the first mandates I discussed with the Glueck planning committee heads was to set aside at least one table for the members of the Rabbinic Alumni to be able to learn in the Glueck *beis medrash*, to feel welcome at all times and to be able to interact with our talmidim.

CHAVRUSA: What are your thoughts on encouraging more talmidim to go into vocations of *avodat hakodesh* and the YU kollelim?

We have so many *kollelim*, that for the uninitiated it can be difficult to keep track. Think about it. We have the Katz Kollel for RIETS students, the Wexner and Beren *Kollelei Elyon*, the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim, the Rabbi Norman Lamm *Kollel L'horaaah*, *kollelim* off-campus at schools and shuls on Long Island and the Upper West Side. We have community *kollelim* in Chicago and Toronto in conjunction with the CJE, and a host of summer *kollelim*. It's a way to maintain a presence and a vibrancy, and to contribute to the communities we serve. It's a way for our *talmidim* to be able to flourish in different learning and teaching environments even after they leave the confines of our yeshiva. We are becoming a yeshiva without borders. Just as YUTorah.org is heard by countless listeners around the world, so too, our physical presence does not need to be confined to Washington Heights. There is a desire for our *musmakhim*, *talmidim* and *roshei yeshiva* to have a presence in different communities on a regular basis. *Baruch Hashem*, we are now big enough to send out older *talmidim* and graduates to different communities. I see the community *kollel* trend as one that will probably be met with continued success and will be desired by more and more communities.

CHAVRUSA: How do you regard the competition to RIETS from both the right and the left?

No competition. There is a general aphorism that *kinas sofrim tarbeh chochmah*. We welcome Torah learning from all quarters and all sections.

CHAVRUSA: What are your feelings when you sign a klaff? Only a small elite group of rabbonim with last names such as Revel, Belkin, Soloveitchik, Lamm and Charlop have had the privilege to do so.

This is part of the task of being the Dean of the Yeshiva, it is part of the *mesorah* of the position. It is my job to discharge the responsibilities of the position to the best of my ability, including the signing of the *klaff* and everything that entails. I take these responsibilities seriously and I'm certainly awed by the significance of the task. ■

