

In & Around Montreal

Yeshiva U reaching out to communities to shape the Jewish future

By JANICE ARNOLD
Staff Reporter

New York-based Yeshiva University (YU) has begun serving the Montreal Jewish community through its Center for the Jewish Future, a multifaceted outreach program.

Using its services, students and teachers at Hebrew Academy have connected with 19 other Jewish schools in North America through videoconferencing, and two Montreal teachers took part in a conference of 120 educators in New York.

As well, 35 Montreal rabbis under the age of 40 spent three days at a retreat in Teaneck, N.J., focusing on finding a balance between their professional and personal lives.

The dean of the 1½-year-old centre, Rabbi Kenneth Brander, who was in Montreal recently to offer YU's services at no charge, said that the centre wants to make an impact on Diaspora Jewry through scholarship and activism, and that it seeks to build a mutually beneficial partnership with the Montreal community.

The university is reaching out not only to its traditional modern Orthodox constituency, but to the Jewish community in general — schools, the rabbinate and organizations in North America and beyond.

It is offering educational activities and leadership development through the prism of Torah values."

YU students provide practical help, such as making sure there was a minyan in hurricane-devastated New Orleans every week, and taking part in protests against men refusing to grant a *get* (Jewish divorce) to their ex-wives.

The centre also gives 125 seminars a year to schools, on a variety of topics, not all about Judaism.

"Last week I gave one on the ethics of war; next week there's one on trauma... We believe it is our mission to share a vision of orthodoxy that embraces modern learning," said Rabbi Brander.

Over 900 of YU's almost 7,000 students are now taking part in some kind of off-campus outreach project, and many of its more than 4,700 faculty members are putting themselves at the disposal of the centre.

Interest in what the centre has to offer has already come from a broad spectrum of the community, "from the Conservative Solomon Schechter schools to the haredi schools," he said.

The centre is the initiative of YU's president Richard Joel, who took office in 2003, the first non-rabbi or scholar in the post.

He chose Rabbi Brander, who was senior rabbi of the Boca Raton Synagogue, to head the centre because of his leadership in building the Orthodox Jewish community and its institutions in south Florida during his 14 years there.

He was ordained at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in 1986, and earlier earned a BA there in computer science and mathematics.

The highlight of the evening, presented by YU and the Mizrahi Organization, was the Montreal premiere of the documentary *Lonely Man of Faith: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*. Its director/producer Ethan Isenberg was also present.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, who died in 1993, was hugely influential in American Jewish life and is credited with reviving Orthodox Judaism. But he was ostracized by many traditional Orthodox rabbis for his outspoken view that Judaism must come to terms with modernity, and for his loathing of fundamentalism.

He championed equal Jewish education for girls, including advanced Torah studies for women. Rare among the scions of eastern European rabbinical dynasties of his generation, he had had a secular higher education, earning a PhD in philosophy at the University of Berlin.

Rabbi Soloveitchik embraced Zionism earlier than many Orthodox rabbis, and was a leader of Mizrahi, the religious Zionist movement.

He was associated with YU for 44 years, ordaining more than 2,000 rabbis: A brilliant Talmudist and an electrifying teacher, he also had decency and kindness, and was much beloved. The film concludes that he left a complicated legacy and there is still debate over what he stood for.

Rabbi Brander, who as a student served as an assistant to Rabbi Soloveitchik, said the mission of the Center for the Jewish Future is in keeping with his mentor's philosophy "that Torah can shape the society around us, that living according to Torah is not a Robin-

son Crusoe lifestyle."

YU, whose origins go back to 1886, is trying to return to the pre-eminence it once had in Jewish life, he said.

"We are not just trying to maintain Judaism, to tread water; we are working toward a robust Judaism that we can share with society... We can't have a ghetto Judaism if we want to flourish."

The centre's reach is going global, he noted. The chief rabbi of Moscow has asked YU to train 30 rabbis in Europe, and even Israeli rabbis are turning to the Diaspora to learn how to be North American-style "community" rabbis, he said.

The evening was co-chaired by Marty Lieberman, Montreal president of the Canadian Friends of YU, and Lynn Eltes. She and husband Sam Eltes, the Friends' national chair, raise funds for scholarships that enable Canadian students to attend YU or its Stern College for Women.

After they graduate, scholarship recipients are expected to return to their hometown or region and work in the community for at least three years.