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Introduction

A MOMENT OF shame nearly begins the notes I began taking some years ago for what was to become this book about study of rabbinic texts among other adult male Jews who are members of the *kollel* (full-time adult study corps) at MTJ. The moment was my first, and very brief, personal encounter with the Rosh Yeshiva—the man who for decades has been the moral, administrative, legal, and scholarly address of last resort at MTJ. Born in 1929 in the Soviet Union, he has been the head of this institution since his father’s passing in the mid-1980s. He is himself regarded as one of the top Orthodox authorities on Jewish law in the world and continues to put in six very full days at the yeshiva, yet in many ways appears as a very private and almost shy person.

My presentation of self in the following brief encounter clearly reflects my nervousness about my place at MTJ, and perhaps some doubt on my part about whether I ever could really come to belong there. The vignette introduces Rabbi Simcha Goldman. Like many at MTJ, he is a regular there but also spends much of his time giving noncredit Talmud classes at various colleges and universities in the New York area. For that reason, I was referred to Rabbi Goldman when I first announced my intention to study at MTJ again. His mission seems to be introducing bright young men with less background to the beauties of Torah, and though I’m less young than most of his study partners, we still study

together whenever our schedules permit. In this anecdote, Rabbi Goldman has given me instructions that I did not follow to my best advantage:

December 25, 2011: Every Sunday morning at 10:15, the Rosh Yeshiva conducts a *shiur* [lesson] in *Mishnah berurah*, the commentary and compendium by the nineteenth-century rabbinic authority known as the Chofetz Chaim, covering the laws of everyday, Sabbath, and holiday practice. Unlike the Talmud shiur held in the library upstairs, this one meets in the cafeteria downstairs—perhaps because the crowd is a bit larger on Sundays. About fifteen men were waiting for the Rosh Yeshiva, and stood as he entered the cafeteria. I stopped him briefly as he approached the table to introduce myself, and then turned around and realized to my embarrassment that I had made everyone else stand longer than they would have had I just allowed the Rosh Yeshiva to proceed to his place. Rabbi Simcha Goldman, my first teacher at the yeshiva, had told me to introduce myself, but I suppose I could have picked a more opportune moment. Later, as I related this awkward moment to my son Jonah who is visiting from California, he said, “Well, of course you weren’t thinking about that. How many situations are you in these days where people routinely stand up as a sign of respect when a certain individual enters the room?”

As it turned out, causing everyone in the class to remain standing while I introduced myself to the Rosh Yeshiva wasn’t the only mistake I made in that encounter. Fortunately, I didn’t become aware of the second cause for embarrassment until more than three years after the fact. In March 2015, I was in the middle of a dreary winter semester in Ithaca, dutifully pursuing my second read through of the entire Babylonian Talmud in the recent ArtScroll edition with English elucidation. Toward the end of tractate Sanhedrin (100a), I reached a passage that discusses what behavior makes one an *apikoros* (roughly, a heretic). Rabbi Nachman says it is one who calls his teacher by his name. I realized only then that when Rabbi Goldman had told me I should introduce myself

to the Rosh Yeshiva, he didn't say how. Not only had I made everyone else wait, but I had addressed the Rosh Yeshiva as "Rabbi——." Even if I hadn't yet seen (or didn't remember) the talmudic warning telling me that wasn't the right way to address him, it felt awkward. So why did I make these mistakes? Perhaps there was something ritualistic about it—the faux pas that begins an ethnography, or (the same point put slightly differently) a semistaged case of what I like to call "wrong ethnography," a scene in which the ethnographer reveals some key aspect of the world being described by showing how he or she misunderstood it early on in the encounter. Maybe in some way I set up my own miscue to dramatize that I was starting an encounter with something very different from my usual routine, a kind of ethnographic *estrangement* that may have seemed almost necessary in a situation where the passage from "home" to "field" is a walk of slightly less than a mile down Essex Street.

Although I didn't introduce myself to the Rosh Yeshiva that morning as an anthropologist, those who became my closest study partners at MTJ certainly knew that was my profession. They knew as well that I had written about the Jewish community of the Lower East Side, and to the extent it mattered to them, were aware that there was some chance I would be writing about them as well. As for me, I remained unsure about my project, through the year I studied more-or-less full-time at MTJ and beyond: Was I working as an anthropologist, or simply, in the discretionary time God and the university had given me, fulfilling a traditional male Jew's dream of engaging in intensive study? Was it possible to do both at the same time?

Thinking of my time at MTJ as only for itself—a complex concept I will explore further in this book—certainly had its compensations. It freed me to some extent from the anthropological compulsion to note and comprehend everything happening around me, clearly an impossible task given the multiple conversations going on at once in that big room, and even more so, the infinite twists of the texts studied there. And even just one of my study partners, Nasanel, shared with me day after day endlessly

convoluted verbal riffs that, were they jazz, would make me the greatest collector of the decade. As his study partner, I could admire these extended riffs while at the same time being frustrated at how little progress they allowed us through the very texts we were ostensibly studying—I, at least, for the first time. As an ethnographer, listening to them without recording them made me feel like a miner without a sieve, watching countless flecks of gold flow past my grasp toward the sea.

To be sure, Nasanel plays an outsize role in this book, much as his voice carries across the entire *beis medresh* (the “house of study,” or study hall), sometimes to the annoyance of those who are just trying to quietly study a text. If I focus on him, it is not because he is a “typical” student at MTJ. Rather, it is because he has more directly challenged my secularism than other, more circumspect acquaintances have, because he is more interested in the specifics of my secular learning than some of them would be, and because part of what makes MTJ special is that it has room for his broad interests and startling juxtapositions. Of course, some of my other study partners are among those quieter students, and they are in this book as well; but there are many others who study diligently at MTJ and find themselves only in other books instead.

Nasanel was, in any case, also my prime confidant as I debated whether and how to think of making this book. On a Wednesday in October 2014—the afternoon of Hoshana Rabbah toward the end of the fall holiday cycle, after almost everyone had left the yeshiva and he was walking me back home in order to continue our conversation, I told him that I would probably write a book about the yeshiva. He said, “You should disguise it somehow—people are very sensitive. Say the yeshiva’s on Henry Street,” just one block further toward the East River than East Broadway. That, I pointed out, wouldn’t help—there’s only one yeshiva on the Lower East Side. Besides, its uniqueness and not its typicality is what draws me.

Later that fall, just back from Ithaca to begin my winter break, I mentioned to Nasanel that I was thinking further about writing a book about the yeshiva, and that I thought I needed to ask the Rosh Yeshiva's permission. This made him nervous, especially when I made clear to him that it would be an academic ethnography and not a book of fiction: "Hmmm . . . certainly your book would be mostly positive but there also has to be some negative to keep it honest, right? You know, in here he's pretty easygoing but he's a big figure in the Orthodox Jewish world, in the Aguda."¹

I made clear that it wouldn't only be about the Rosh Yeshiva, but about the beis medresh as a whole.

"Well, then, you'd have to ask everybody's permission, no? And anyway, he might not mind, but the people in the office really won't want a book written about them. This isn't exactly a place that's looking for that kind of publicity."

I joked that I wanted Nasanel to ask for me, and he was relieved a bit later when he realized I wasn't actually asking him to. He still seemed to think it was risky. "Well, you're being extremely high-minded about this. Whatever he says to you, he'll be smiling. But what if he says no?" I replied that I'd be disappointed, but I wouldn't write the book.

This again made Nasanel nervous, not so much because I'd be risking Rebbi's wrath as because Nasanel wants to see my book. "And would you show him the manuscript beforehand?" I said I wasn't sure. I don't want to be censored, but by now it's not unusual for anthropologists to show their manuscripts to the people they're writing about before they publish. That surprised Nasanel in turn: "Wow, things must have changed in the past thirty years. Did you ever hear of a guy called the Central Park Guru? He's this guy who's been through literally every religion: now he's semi-Lubavitch. At one point they called him the Central Park Guru, and he had one follower who asked a lot of very blunt, in-your-face-type questions. It turned out that guy was a Columbia professor, and when he published his book, the Central Park Guru was really angry. When I first came here some people thought I was

writing a book, because I asked Rebbi very blunt questions that nobody else would ask.”

I told Nasanel I would be thinking about this some more, and that I would quite likely rehearse my explanation to Nasanel before going in to speak to the Rebbi.

I received a bit of encouragement from an unexpected quarter—the yeshiva’s Mashgiach, a rabbi in his sixties, originally from California, who like most of those who work and study at MTJ, knows much about the wider world around him and remains uncompromising in his insistence on the primacy of our reliance on God. In the traditional Lithuanian-style yeshiva, the mashgiach’s role is very roughly that of “dean of students”: he supervises the course of study, makes sure students are being diligent, and tests them if and when they are ready to receive rabbinical ordination. He also attends to the shaping of their moral sensibilities. At MTJ, the last function is represented primarily by the Mashgiach’s weekly delivery of a half-hour *mussar shmues* (moral discourse), a tradition that grows out of the nineteenth-century Mussar movement and that was once a more central part of many Lithuanian-style yeshivas. The *shmues* is generally closely tied to the weekly Torah portion, and that week the Mashgiach discussed the eternal question of why the biblical Joseph never sent word to his father that he was safe and prospering in Egypt. The answer: he was waiting to have his father and all eleven of his brothers (thus explaining the need to have Benjamin sent down from Canaan as well) bow to him to fulfill his earlier dream. Still, the Mashgiach asked rhetorically: Why was that so important? Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh’s dream, and he then went on unbidden to proceed with advice for how to handle the coming famine and was duly appointed to carry out that advice. In order to demonstrate the validity of his dream-prophecies and thus carry out his famine mission, he had to see his own earlier dreams fulfilled as well. The moral the Mashgiach announced was that, if you see something, even something very ambitious or audacious, and it’s a *davar tov*, a good

thing—go ahead and do it and don't shrink, don't be too humble. As he was saying this, I was asking myself: Is the book I want to write about the yeshiva a *davar tov* or not? The answer wasn't clear in my mind.

Later, as I sat talking to Nasanel about how to approach the Rosh Yeshiva with my plan to write a book, he suggested, "Tell him not just what good it will do for you, but also that it will be good for the yeshiva, it will be good publicity." So evidently Nasanel imagined that it could be a *davar tov*. In the end, I wasn't able to get in to see the Rosh Yeshiva after shiur, but on the advice of his *gabbai* (secretary) Effi (who only knew I needed to speak to the Rosh Yeshiva, not about what) I approached the Rosh Yeshiva after minchah, the afternoon prayer service, and said, "I would like to speak to the Rebbi about a matter that concerns the relationship between my professional work and my study at the yeshiva." He replied that he wouldn't be in his office after shiur tomorrow, so he said, "Next week."

Although I had hardly exchanged a word with the Rosh Yeshiva since that day I had introduced myself, I had good reason to imagine he didn't consider me exactly the star of the class. My notes reflect my tendency to lose the thread of a difficult discussion and fall asleep during the shiur, if only momentarily. Some three months after I started going steadily, I wrote, "Today was I think the first time I didn't nod off at all in the Rosh Yeshiva's shiur. I sure didn't follow everything. Twice the older gentleman who sat next to me and had been chatting me up before the shiur nudged me and said quietly, 'How often does this kind of thing come up in real life?'"

A few days later, I again kept my eyes open through the seventy minutes or so of the shiur: "I didn't fall asleep at all in shiur today and followed much of the Tosafos—at least in the sense of knowing where the Rosh Yeshiva was reading. But I did find myself at one point in a near meditative trance, focusing on the patterns of white spaces between words on succeeding lines of Tosafos."

Occasionally, I felt I had a decent “excuse” for being less than perfectly alert, such as the day I attended the 11:00 a.m. shiur after driving from Ithaca and arriving in New York around midnight the night before.

More often than not, the times I lose the thread, the Rosh Yeshiva and a couple of the veteran members of the shiur are struggling over a subtle difficulty that I don’t understand. Sometimes it seems as though I, and even some of the others who’ve been in the shiur far longer than I, are observers at a private study session mostly involving the Rosh Yeshiva and two of my regular study partners. Both are fathers of families, in early middle age. One, Yisroel Ruven, is a lifelong Lower East Side resident, deeply devoted both to the Rosh Yeshiva and to the neighborhood’s Jewish heritage. He has piercing blue eyes, and, like several others at MTJ, a neatly trimmed beard. Like a true native East Sider, he has no hesitation in speaking his mind, whether the topic is neighborhood politics, the boundaries of Orthodox Jewish practice, or the plausibility of a given reading in a passage of the Talmud. The second, Asher Stoler, commutes to the Lower East Side every day from the eastern end of Brooklyn. More reserved, or at least less voluble than Yisroel Ruven, Asher almost never raises his voice except very occasionally in frustration when a study partner fails to reach what he believes to be proper understanding of the Gemara. He takes detailed notes at the Rosh Yeshiva’s shiur, kept in the margins of his own volumes of the Gemara and in notebooks left by the windowsill, though I wish he would at least make photocopies of them for safekeeping.

As my mind wanders while they debate the fine points back and forth, I sometimes have brief daydreams that are vivid and tangentially but suggestively tied to the actual conversation—such as an image of a group of learned and observant Ashkenazic Jews in the mountains of North Carolina in, say, the early nineteenth century.

There doesn’t seem to be any particular stigma about catnapping at some point in the midst of what can be a ten-hour day devoted to study, as there certainly was, for example, in the law

office where I worked for several years when I was younger. One morning I arrive around ten fifteen. Asher was learning with the somewhat troubled high schooler he'd been supervising. Our fourth regular study partner, Hillel, was there as well. Hillel, then a young man in his early twenties, not yet married and at that time unsure about his own career goals, was dozing over a *khumesh*, the Five Books of the Torah with Rashi's commentary. When he woke up I said, "That's impressive—it's hard to sleep that long with your chin resting on your arm like that."

He replied, "You have to be really tired."

By the spring of 2015, still attending shiur whenever I was in New York, I made some progress in both attention and comprehension. One day I noted: "Progress: Even when I don't understand what they're talking about, it's still not as meaningless to me. Or maybe that's just because I got up later and didn't go to the gym, so it's easier to stay focused this morning." And yet, even then, there were days, especially after a long absence, when returning to the beis medresh was painful because I felt both so far behind and so inconsistent in my attendance. On such days, retaining the sense of belonging suddenly required a great effort.

Noting particular preferences and concerns of my fellows in the beis medresh is probably one of the easier ways to retain that sense of belonging—certainly more feasible than suddenly becoming an expert interpreter of the more abstruse commentaries, or performing the kind of ideological makeover that would make me more of a *kollel* insider and less of an anthropologist. One morning I walked into the beis medresh and presented Yisroel Ruven with the gift of some very expensive and very fancy dark chocolate from Guatemala that's marked "OU pareve," to indicate its kashrut supervision and status as neither dairy nor meat. He had mentioned—as I understood—a year or more previously that he liked dark chocolate and would love to have some fancy chocolate except that he only eats *cholov yisroel*, dairy products that are not only kosher but handled and produced by Jews.² It was a good investment: he not only made clear at the time that he appreciated

it very much, but later on (after shiur), when Hillel and I were learning on our own in Asher's temporary absence, Yisroel Ruven came over and spent some time with us clarifying key points covered in the shiur. I don't mean to suggest that he wouldn't have helped us but for the chocolate. But still.

Perhaps keeping good notes, during the times that I do so, is also a way of belonging. My study partner has a notebook; so do I. But I kept my yeshiva journal only sporadically, and there are no notes for several months of the year I attended full time. Why I kept notes for some periods and not others, I don't know very well. I don't even understand very well why there are periods when I am conscious of the value of note-taking but there seems nothing to report. Sometimes, as during the semester I was teaching a seminar on Jewish ethnography at Cornell, the texts I assigned to my class helped by reminding me of the importance of the mundane rather than the extraordinary in ethnography. Other times it was indeed hard to know what to note other than, "We spent several hours studying a very difficult text." What is the anthropologist to do when it's impossible to take field notes on discourse in the field—not because the cultural performance is so ineffable, subtle, or sensual, but because the cultural "text" depends on a literal text that is barely accessible to the ethnographer?

Then too, even though its sensibilities and its history are deeply embedded in the specificities of the Jewish Lower East Side, the camaraderie of study at MTJ is focused almost exclusively on the time everyone spends together in the room. Unlike some yeshivas, the beis medresh at MTJ is not the focus of an all-encompassing community.³ Thus, my tentative thoughts of furthering some of my yeshiva friendships outside its walls hardly took shape—with the significant exception of the many times Nasanel walked me home to the East Village before returning to the yeshiva by himself.

At the beginning of one summer I had mentioned to Yisroel Ruven that I would be going back and forth to Ithaca, and would like to stop off and visit him at the bungalow colony in the

mountains where his family spends the summer. He countered with a suggestion that he'd like to see Ithaca. Elissa and I were in Ithaca in fact for two weeks in July, but I never contacted him to invite him, and I kept thinking afterwards about my failure to do so. It seemed like it would require too much organization, such as buying a new grill and having him bring the meat for a barbecue so as to meet his standards of kashrut. Even more so, I didn't want to address the fact that my observance of kashrut at home would likely not be sufficient for Yisroel Ruven's family. But I was also thinking: What will I show him? What will we talk about? Is there enough for us outside the yeshiva?

Since those who come to study at the beis medresh are offered informal assistance with finding study partners, but not "placed" within any rigorous system, it is common enough to see someone studying by himself, and perhaps like me, he may not always be happy doing so. One year on the Fast of Esther just before Purim I found myself unaccountably lonely, wanting very much to sit with Asher and Hillel as they studied the laws of Purim, but for some reason too shy to ask.

Of course, Yisroel Ruven and I could study together anywhere, not just at the yeshiva. Indeed, one recent summer when he was away in the country with his family, he kept up his studies by telephone with Asher, while the latter sat in his usual place in the yeshiva. But perhaps when this book is published, it will be another bridge for conversation for us outside of the talmudic text. I have already had some indications that the book is eagerly awaited by at least some at MTJ. At the annual kollel dinner in May 2015, months after I had gotten the Rosh Yeshiva's permission to do so, I told Asher about my project. He seemed delighted. I told him he could have any name he wanted, and after musing a bit, he somewhat shyly asked me if he could be called by his actual name. Though that request seemed reasonable, I did tell the Rosh Yeshiva I would change names. And Yisroel Ruven had warned me early on: "If you write a book, just don't use my real name."

So there are risks, of the kind alluded to by Holmes and Marcus in the epigraph to this chapter when they refer to “the politics of knowledge that any project of fieldwork involves.” Surely a key aspect of those politics consists of rules for inclusion and exclusion: who may choose to join the subject community and who may not. One implicit requirement for anyone who wants to study at MTJ is that such person be identified as Jewish. More troubling, from the perspective of a discourse committed to the expansion of rights and opportunities to all without regard to gender, is that study at MTJ is only available to males. That exclusion surely must be noted, but otherwise I will not attempt to address it here, let alone reconcile its self-evident justification in the eyes of my colleagues and teachers at MTJ with its likely repugnance to several of my academic colleagues, and perhaps some other readers as well. Moreover, since study at MTJ is an exclusively male realm, and I am not attempting here any study of the home life of its denizens, the women who surely make it possible for their husbands and sons to spend so much time in unremunerative study remain largely invisible in this book.

I do not think it is especially helpful, in any case, to think of this as a book written *about* the members of a religious “world” for the members of a secular world. Certainly, the university—in my case, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I worked during the first year I spent at the yeshiva, and then Cornell University, where I work now—and the yeshiva have their own distinct and demanding codes. Both, like the very different institutions on which Holmes and Marcus focused their attention, are institutions whose reason for existence is the production and transmission of expert knowledge. And while MTJ focuses on exoteric rather than “secret” knowledge—on a Torah that is in principle to be shared with all male Jews, at the very least—it is also an institution that relies on the loyalty and discretion of its regulars. Accordingly, there are profound limits to my service as a source of secret knowledge for the academic anthropological community—on general ethical grounds, to be sure, but more

pressingly because I want to continue to belong at the yeshiva. Similar considerations in other ethnographic contexts have produced the notion of what the Native American anthropologist Audra Simpson calls “ethnographic refusal,”⁴ which for my purposes may be described here as the right and sometimes the responsibility of both ethnographers and those about whom they write not to tell everything that might be of interest to the academy as presently constituted. The right of ethnographic refusal is one of the conditions of possibility of what we call auto-ethnography, which in many cases, and not just this one, is properly a form of undoing. As the Gemara itself warns:

There was this student regarding whom a rumor emerged that he revealed a matter that had been spoken in the study hall twenty-two years earlier. Rav Ami expelled him from the study hall and said: “This one reveals secrets.” (B. Sanhedrin 31a)

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