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April 10, 2013

Contemporary Campus Kiruv at Emory: Departing from “Outreach” and “Returning” to Judaism

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## Abstract

### Contemporary Campus Kiruv at Emory: Departing from “Outreach” and “Returning” to Judaism By Dara Gever

Emory’s stimulating scholastic undergraduate campus has become the launching pad for a new approach to the Jewish concept of “*kiruv*,” a Hebrew word for “reaching out” to Jews who are “far away.” In American university contexts, the term “*kiruv*” has traditionally been used to refer to the nationally-sanctioned Jewish satellite organizations Hillel and Chabad. In addition to these campus “outreach models,” Jewish American college students at Emory are being courted by an Orthodox organization offers paid classes and free trips to Israel. This new organization, called “Meor,” is the “elephant in the room,” a burgeoning force of Emory’s Jewish community that is becoming impossible to ignore and is important to understand. Since coming to Emory hardly five years ago, Meor has expanded the scope of its programming and its clientele at an enviable rate, compared to that of Emory Hillel and Chabad. Parents, familiar with the Hillel and Chabad paradigms, have little knowledge of Meor because of its novelty. Emory’s Jewish professors and lay leaders, as well as the traditional “Jewish outreach” leaders, are scratching their heads at the changing face of campus Jewish life. Students themselves, even those who are most affected by the new campus *kiruv*, are often puzzled by the plethora of irresistible opportunities for participating in Jewish life. Using an ethnographic approach, this thesis will examine the ways in which Meor at Emory University departs from the conventional campus *kiruv* models by analyzing the goals, programming and rhetoric of Meor educators and the experiences of Meor student participants. This account of Emory’s transforming Jewish life, and the candid perspectives of *kiruv* educators and Emory students, is the first study that examines campus *kiruv* through ethnographic perspectives.

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## **Preface: How This Project Began**

Growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, the extent of my involvement in Jewish life was attending biweekly “Hebrew School” sessions at my Reform synagogue. My rabbi performed the Bar and Bat Mitzvah ritual rites for my class when we were in seventh grade, but enrollment in Hebrew School decreased substantially the year after my class completed our Jewish “rite of passage” at the age of 13. My parents insisted that I stay in Hebrew school until I was confirmed during my sophomore year of high school, a ceremony that celebrates graduation from secondary-school Jewish learning. Among the dwindling number of students who had persisted in their Jewish learning until Confirmation, even fewer were inclined to continue their Jewish education afterward. I chose to continue to attend weekly classes at my synagogue through a program called Gratz, a 2-year college-level course which awarded me a certificate to teach Hebrew School to Reform children by the time I graduated from high school. By all the standards of Jewish learning with which I was familiar at that point in my life, I considered myself an expert.

When I entered Emory University in 2009 as a freshman, I struggled to find a way to express my Jewishness in my new environment, which was far from the Jewish community where I grew up. It was not until Rabbi Yaakov Fleshel “friended” me on Facebook that I learned there was a Jewish organization called “Meor” at Emory University that offered an extremely cheap trip to Israel in the summer. I applied to the trip, which was advertised on a Facebook event invitation, and Rabbi Fleshel promptly emailed me to request an interview. I was unaccustomed to such informal interaction with a rabbi, particularly one to whom I do not pay synagogue dues. When I met with Rabbi Fleshel at the Dobbs University Center, he told me

that I was the perfect candidate for the trip after I told him that I was a Reform Jew, and because I was free on the dates listed. Suddenly, with this acceptance, I felt I had found my Jewish niche, and they were giving me an offer I could not refuse when they invited me on a three week trip to Israel that was almost completely subsidized by Meor.

My acceptance to Meor's Israel trip was contingent on my enrollment in a weekly course called "Maimonides." I signed up for the course with some of my friends and sorority sisters, and we were promised a \$300 stipend for our completion of the course. When I arrived at the first class, I expected to learn about biblical history and facets of Judaism that I had never been taught at Hebrew School. I was surprised when the first Maimonides kicked off with a speaker named Judge Danny Butler, who gave such a moving speech about the difficulties he faced raising a child with Cystic Fibrosis that almost every person in the room was visibly weeping by the end of his session. Before Danny Butler spoke, I had been sitting in a room with semi-strangers; after he finished, we commiserated with him as though we were his close relatives. More importantly, after he finished I had never felt more inspired to practice the Jewish concept of *chesed* ("philanthropy"), which the Judge emphasized in his stories. In fact, when I listened to Judge Butler for a second time during my senior year of college, a group of girls approached the Judge after the class with a plastic cup that many of the participants had filled with donations.

Each Maimonides class had a similar structure: there was an inspirational speaker, and afterward Rabbi Fleshel would give a short lesson about a Jewish topic. Chana Levitan, author of the book *I Only Want to Get Married Once*, flew to Emory to lecture about the importance of healthy relationships. Girls at Emory would arrange special private sessions with Chana for love advice, and Rabbi Fleshel soon called her Chana "Love"-itan because of the popularity of her



dating consultations. The last session of my class was hosted at Rabbi Fleshel's house, where he and his wife prepared a presentation about managing their relationship. They encouraged us to ask questions, and the setting had become so intimate that many of my peers asked the Orthodox rabbi about his sexual relationship with his wife; some students volunteered information about their own rendezvous. By the end of the program, I felt sincere curiosity about Judaism and a desire to learn from other charismatic Jewish leaders like the ones who had taught me in Maimonides.

In addition to our Maimonides classroom learning, my group was required to attend two overnight Shabbat experiences ("*Shabbaton*"), in the Atlanta community. The guidelines were made clear: each person was assigned to a family in Toco Hills, Atlanta, where they were scheduled to share Shabbat dinner and given a bed to sleep until Saturday morning. The *Shabbaton* was not considered complete unless each participant attended services, lunch and dinner in the community. In other words, in order to receive the stipend, we had to give up an entire Friday night and Saturday observing Shabbat instead of experiencing the regular college night life. This meant that instead of going to a fraternity party to drink beer, we wore modest clothing and sipped wine at the houses of both young and old couples. Kids who had not been to a synagogue since their Bar or Bat mitzvah spent the weekend in this community observing the strict laws of Shabbat enforced in the Toco Hills Orthodox neighborhoods. During my first *Shabbaton*, my two sorority sisters and I stayed with an elderly couple who made us feel welcome with home-cooked dinner and a cozy room; during my second overnight Shabbat, I was assigned with one other friend to the house of a young couple who had become religious during their college years. I spent that Saturday afternoon discussing gender roles with my

hostess while her husband was at the synagogue praying, and I remember feeling slightly troubled when she described her duties as a Jewish wife using language that I associated with sexist rhetoric. Both *Shabbaton* couples insisted that the gender differences were necessary to lead a fulfilling Jewish life, and they appeared extremely satisfied when they adhered to the sex-segregated duties Orthodox Jewish law enforces for men and women.

Shortly after my freshman year ended in May, 2010, I met the Emory and George Washington University (GWU) students who signed up for the joint Emory-GWU Meor Israel trip at JFK airport. When I arrived, I was issued a seat next to a rabbi who was one of the chaperones for the trip and who hailed from the George Washington University branch of Meor. When this rabbi put his giant hat box, which looked like it had emerged from a 1950s movie, into the overhead compartment I realized that this would not be simply a vacation to Israel: Birthright trips are not supervised by several Orthodox rabbis for three weeks.

Upon arriving, we found out that there were also Orthodox *madrichim* (“guides”) that helped chaperone the trip of about 40 college students. Most of the girls became very close with a 22-year-old *madrichah* from Touro College who seemed relentlessly passionate about every Jewish concept we were taught. On the first night of the trip we were taken to the Western Wall, and the chaperones cautioned us that since Jews are a “family” and many of our “relatives” reside in Israel, they would be “looking out” for us. The staff advised us not to take offense at religious sites if a stranger were to yell an obscenity about the modesty of our clothing; shortly after, a small elderly woman appeared at the wall and called us disgraceful in the eyes of God, motioning at our clothing. Our *madrichah* smiled graciously and said, “That’s just Grandma.

How nice of her to look out for us.” This was our initiation into the world of Orthodox Jewry, shaped by the Meor staff.

I had been informed, upon my acceptance, that the three-week trip included a “learning” component for a few hours during nine of the 21 days in Israel, but Rabbi Fleshel assured me that the majority of the trip would be spent exploring and touring. My visions of floating in the Dead Sea quickly evaporated on the first day of the trip, when our groups’ tour bus stopped at the bottom of a hill in Har Nof, one of the most religious neighborhoods in Israel. The chaperones asked the women to disembark the bus, which was parked at the yellow gates of “Neve Yerushalayim,” an all-girls seminary. The boys, we were told, would be sent to a *yeshivah*, an all-boys Jewish school. Neve has a sprawling, verdant campus with a magnificent view from atop the mountain of Har Nof, but it was astonishing to see the students on their quad completely covered; under the same circumstances at Emory, the quad would be filled with girls wearing only bathing suits. We were quickly told that students at Neve adhere to a dress code that requires them to cover their collarbones, arms, and legs completely; I, along with many other girls, had not brought such clothing on a trip to a desert that was scheduled during the heat of the summer. The women insisted that they felt no discomfort wearing winter styles in the blazing sun of Israel, and learning in classrooms without air-conditioning.

The classes at Neve were not like classes at Emory: there was no homework, and no requirement to take notes. Instead, Meor hired a staff to teach the Meor kids who were hosted at Neve, and these were selected largely from the staff of “Aish Hatorah,” an Orthodox school located in the coveted real estate lot directly behind the Western wall. Chana Levitan gave the same speech she had given at Emory again at Neve, and the other girls in my class were very

receptive to her ideas about relationships--again. Another woman visited our class to talk about modesty, sex, and the role of women in a Jewish marriage, and we also had a class with a woman who is well-known for her wisdom at Neve, Tziporah Heller. Although she is not *halachically* permitted to become a rabbi, she demonstrated enormous intelligence and scholarship in her lecture; we were told that she is a mother to 13 children outside of her scholastic duties. At the beginning of many classes, the female teachers would say that the learning environment was much “better” without “the boys”; most of the girls in my class agreed that the all-girls setting was conducive to the types of discussions and questions that were instigated by these speakers.

Even though the female teachers hid their skin under thick clothing and observed their versions of Orthodox Jewish laws, the first thing that many told us was that they became religious while living away from their families. They would begin many classes by commiserating with our difficulty, as beginners and outsiders raised in secular Western culture, to comprehend the woman’s place in Judaism. These women demonstrated that despite being religious, they were polished, poised, intellectual, successful, and happy with their role in Judaism. They seemed most genuine when describing their secular lives which seemed to have existed in a vacuum before they became Orthodox Jewish women: these stories always explained how empty their lives had felt once they learned about Orthodox Judaism. After deciding to adopt the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle, daily tasks began took on more meaning, they said. Many also claimed that their new religious obligations imbued all of daily living with holiness.

I felt that I could trust what was said by the women who came from secular backgrounds because they assured us that they had “worked through” all of their issues with gender roles before they finalized their decision to become observant. These teachers persuaded us that if we

put in effort to learn more at Neve we would also *eventually* feel comfortable living an Orthodox lifestyle--in their words, a “Jewish” lifestyle.

The rabbis who came to our class often gave compelling speeches that were funny, deep, and inspirational, and they always welcomed discussions at the end of their lessons. When male rabbis gave lessons about gendered duties, occasionally the questions that the women in my class asked turned into heated discussions. It was more difficult to hear a man in a black hat dictate Jewish law to us than it was to hear these rules from a woman who was actually following them. At one point, a few women became deeply offended by what a rabbi said about female gender roles, and some of the girls cried on the bus ride back to the hotel. The group of girls complained to our chaperones that the teachers were treating the women disrespectfully. The Meor rabbis and *madrichot* were deeply concerned, and they sat next to each person on the bus and asked what happened in class.

Perhaps Meor anticipated our discomfort with our teachers, and this may have been the reason Meor assigned each girl a “private tutor” on the first day of class. My tutor was 22 years old, married, and had just had her first baby. She wore a scarf over her hair for the purpose of *tznius* (“modesty”), and at first I felt uncomfortable talking to her because she was close to my age yet I felt that I could not connect with her circumstances. Eventually we warmed up to one another, and she began to bring her baby to classes; most of the other tutors were of a similar age, and they also brought their infants to our lessons. My tutor answered questions that I was too nervous to ask in class and she inquired about my feelings after each class ended. After several sessions, I felt more accustomed to learning from the Orthodox rabbis in their black and

white garb and the Orthodox women in their modest clothing; I got excited when any of the students at Neve would allow me to hold their babies.

We spent three Shabbats in Israel, and Meor had a plan for each student for every meal during the 24-hour long weekly holiday that Jews set aside as a day of rest. During the first Friday night, the beginning of Shabbat, we went to a Kibbutz that was a vacation spot for Orthodox families, and during dinner I sat next to Tom Steinberg, the manager of the Tisch family fund<sup>1</sup>. I felt honored to be able to sit next to such an important person, and his personal story seemed remarkable: he was a rising Vice President at Goldman Sachs, but decided to leave the corporate world to become religious; the Tisches eventually hired him because they trusted the ethics that he followed as an Orthodox Jew, he told us. Steinberg passed around his priceless Super Bowl ring so that the entire group could admire how his devotion to Judaism had brought him such great success. The second Friday night I ate dinner in Beit Shemesh at the house of the vice president of a cell phone company that I always used on my trips to Israel. At one point during the dinner, my hostess apologized for not getting out of her chair to serve us food, telling us that she was used to being waited on by servants; at that point it seemed to us that everybody who chose to become religious in their twenties accrued an impressive fortune. One year later, a neighborhood of Beit Shemesh ("*Ramat Beit Shemesh*") attracted international media attention when a group of ultra-Orthodox men spit on a young schoolgirl and called her "whore."<sup>2</sup>

After several learning sessions, everyone noticed that some people on the trip were trying to observe more *mitzvot* (Jewish "commandments") and were taking the lessons very seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Finances the Tisch School of Arts (NYU) and half of the New York Giants.

<sup>2</sup> According to a 2011 New York Times report, an 8 year old girl became "terrified of walking to her elementary school here after ultra-Orthodox men spit on her, insulted her and called her a prostitute because her modest dress did not adhere exactly to their more rigorous dress code" ("Israeli Girl, 8, at Center of Tension").

One of the boys on the trip pledged that he would “be” *shomer negiyah*<sup>3</sup>. Some boys would wrap *tefillin* on the bus rides as part of a traditional morning prayer ritual for Jewish men. At the end of the trip a boy who had just graduated and had planned to go to law school later that summer decided to postpone his graduate school acceptance for two more years so that he could attend *yeshivah* in Har Nof. The trip chaperones supported and facilitated his decision by providing him the funds and support he needed for this endeavor. At this point, I realized that something larger than Jewish learning was occurring: the chaperones and the teachers seemed to be not-so-subtly recruiting previously-secular people from Emory to the lifestyle we were learning about, and they were succeeding.

My suspicion was confirmed when the friendly *madrichah* approached me one morning before the trip ended and, exasperated, said, “Dara Gever, that’s all everybody’s been talking about the past couple of days. We just had a meeting about you because we wanted to discuss how we can give you more opportunities to learn with us!” I was flattered that she had compiled a list of learning programs in Israel that I could do after the trip--either that same summer, the following summer, or after I graduated. The Meor staff presented me with options that I had never thought of, and all the programs were free. They set up a time for me to meet with the dean of Neve to discuss more opportunities to learn at Neve, although I had no intention and no ability to study in Israel at this seminary. As soon as I sat down, across from the dean, he pulled out a camera and snapped a picture of my surprised face. He then explained that he takes pictures of every person he meets and records the photo next to the name of its subject so that he can remember each person’s face. He gave me an application to apply to Neve to study, either

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<sup>3</sup> One Jewish custom that some Orthodox Jews interpret as mandating that men and women not make physical contact before marriage. Other Jewish sects have jettisoned its enforcement, but instructors of Meor maintain that the strictest interpretation is the only authentic way of being *shomer negiyah*.

for a few months or for an entire year, and he also told me that he was allowing women from my Meor trip the opportunity to study at Neve after our trip ended--if we decided to extend our departure from Israel for an extra week.

The staff seemed to anticipate all of my responses and reactions, and they had retort for all of my polite efforts to decline their offers. When I said that I lacked the money, they offered to subsidize my learning; when I said I did not have the time, they were quick to tell me about shorter programs that were more convenient for my availability. Even though they could not convince me to apply to another program at Neve, after these discussions I felt as though I had no reason to have declined their offers and many reasons to have accepted. I realized that my chaperones and mentors had a specific goal that they wanted me to reach, and though I was flattered by the attention I was apprehensive about Orthodox Judaism; still, I felt that it would be rude to completely refuse their generous offers without allowing them to give me more information about their programming.

When it was time for our trip to leave Israel, I decided to extend my stay in order to give myself an opportunity to explore Israel outside of the Orthodox programming in which I had been immersed for the past three weeks. I remember that I immediately boarded a bus from the hotel in East Jerusalem to Tel Aviv. After one night, I decided to visit my friends who were staying at Neve for an extra week for Meor Plus to get a cell phone charger. My phone was dying, and I could not find a replacement for my charger. While I was riding on the precariously rolling Israeli bus with my suitcase, I noticed two men who were also holding suitcases. One man was a lawyer and appeared to be over 30 years old, and his friend was in his mid-twenties. They told me that they were backpacking around Israel and that they planned to stay at a hostel



that they had heard to be a good lodging in the Old City. I decided to check into their hostel so that I could leave my bags there while I charged my phone at Neve, which was walking distance away on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Then they told me that their hostel was in the Christian quarter of the Old City. They said they were excited to hear the church bells ring in the morning while they slept on the hostel roof. These were the first two Christians I had seen in three weeks, and I was skeptical; the boundaries between Jew and non-Jew were reified constantly at Neve, and Gentiles represented the secular mainstream culture.

After disembarking from the bus, we ventured to the address of the hostel. It was dark outside, and as we walked through the corridors lined with Jerusalem stone I noticed that the signs were written in Arabic. Halfway through the Arab Quarter, a hand shot out of an alleyway and attached firmly to my ankle. I screamed, and a group of young men ran away laughing; from that point on, the two Christians let me walk between them so that I would be less vulnerable. The Christians protected me until we checked into the hostel. After surveying the lodging, we walked for about 10 minutes until we reached the heart of Ben Gurion street, which is most festive on Thursday nights.

As I passed a restaurant, accompanied by my two new friends, I spotted my *madrichah* from my tour eating dinner with a man. He introduced himself as Uncle Jerry, a street-dancer in Jerusalem. I told him that I had met the *madrichah* through a Meor program that had just ended, and he darted from me to my two companions, skeptically. When I told him I had a reservation at a hostel in the Christian Quarter and that I planned to retrieve my cell phone charger from Neve that night, he immediately grabbed his cell phone. After a hushed conversation with the caller, he returned to the table and told me that he had arranged for the driver assigned to pick up

his dancers to pick me up and transport my luggage to Neve. He seemed to be collaborating with Neve or Meor in some way. Somehow, in my effort to escape from Neve, I had been delivered back to the seminary within one day.

I stayed at Neve with about 4 other women from my program, and in exchange for the free bed we attended more classes at the seminary. After classes ended, we would venture around Jerusalem at night, eating non-kosher food and experiencing the night life, then we would return to classes in the morning. Unfortunately, the guard at the yellow gate of Neve made it clear that he did not approve of our schedule, and each night when we returned he refused to let us in. He would accuse us of dressing immodestly, of fraternizing with boys, and of staying out too late, then he would deny our entry through the yellow gate each night. He made us prove we were allowed to stay at Neve every night by making us call a woman living in the residence halls and asking her to come out to identify us. Once, when none of our friends answered their phones because they were asleep, we had to argue with the stubborn guard until four in the morning outside of the gate, and our Orthodox *madrichah* cried when he accused us of breaching decorum, acting “immodestly.” In the sunlight, when I walked through the gate and showed him my ID he nodded and said “*baruch hagever*,” “Blessed is the man/hero”; the religious guard treated me with both deference and scorn. My friends from Emory and I were alarmed that this man had the authority to tell us what we should be wearing outside of school, who we could spend time with, and what time we could come home. The staff of Neve apologized for the security guard’s rules, but they said we had to comply with their security standards.

When I returned from my Israel trip and told my parents about my classes, they were taken aback; they consulted with resources from our Jewish community, and concluded that this

trip was a function of the Lubavitch Jews. Apparently, Reform rabbis dislike Lubavitch because of their free Jewish services, which drive many of them away from the pricey Reform temples. In other words, my parents struggled to understand what Meor was. When the next school year began, my friends and I made a determined effort to light the silver Shabbat candles Rabbi Fleshel had given us during the trip; they were a gift from Meor, on the condition that we light them each week. I accepted Rabbi Fleshel's invitation to participate in Maimonides II for the first semester of my sophomore year. We met each week at a student center for one-on-one learning sessions, and I was, once again, required to attend a *Shabbaton*.

My reward for completing Maimonides II was a flight to Israel and acceptance to an internship during winter break at Neve. The internship was called the Peer Educator Research Internship (PERI), and not only was it a free trip to Israel, it also included a \$400.00 stipend. The woman in charge of the internship is an Australian who was once a resident psychologist on a national talk show before she became religious. About 10 girls and 10 boys were accepted to the program, and each of us was assigned a Jewish mitzvah to research and present to our peers; at the end of the internship, we were certified to be "peer educators," meaning we were ordained to give our *mitzvah* presentations to the students at our campuses. As an incentive, the internship director announced that for each person who was inspired to apply to PERI after hearing us present, the presenter would receive about \$100.00. As for the *mitzvot* we researched, our options were limited to prayer, keeping kosher, modesty, *shomer negiyah*, charity, and keeping Shabbat, among a few other carefully selected "commandments."

The PERI program that I enrolled in during Emory's winter break in 2011 was very similar to my first Meor trip to Israel because most of the speakers and their speeches were

exactly the same. My perspective changed when I experienced the same lessons for a second time because I paid more attention to the ways my co-participants were responding to these lessons upon hearing them for the first time. The inspiring lectures were impressive the first time I heard them, but I was surprised at the way the speakers were able to duplicate precisely what they said several months earlier, including all of the jokes that had seemed candidly funny. The second time around it sounded less genuine, and more rehearsed. We also attended classes about public speaking and Jewish leadership, and the PERI coordinators arranged for the men and women to take separate trips typical for tourists. The women in my program and I went to Tzfat, a city that is considered one of the holiest in Israel, which has heavy emphasis on mysticism and *kabbalah*; we visited “Ein Gedi,” the waterfalls where the biblical King David is purported to have written poetry found in Psalms; we took a bus to an all-woman’s beach where we smeared mud on our bodies and floated in the dead sea--the PERI internship coordinator cheerfully wore a water-proof black bathing dress that covered her elbows, collarbone, and ankles while we wore bikinis--and our coordinator scheduled an appointment at the sulfur baths next to the sea to “treat ourselves.”

Our PERI coordinator brought us to hear “Discovery” lectures at the *yeshivah* named Aish Hatorah. “Discovery” involved four lecture from well-trained speakers who tried to persuade us that the written Torah is undeniably divine, and their arguments were remarkable. One man told us the story of a researcher who had found a pattern in the Hebrew letters of the Torah, and through an algorithm he had developed he found a statistically significant pattern of random Hebrew letters that, when put together, hold great meaning. He tested the pattern by entering the names and birth and death dates of over 30 rabbis; all but three were confirmed by

the patterns. When he published his thesis findings in peer review, he told us, a man contested his conclusion because he found that three of the rabbis had incorrect birth or death dates recorded in the researcher's methodology; when the researcher corrected the dates, his findings were 100% accurate.

Another man showed us how certain letters in the scroll of Esther are enlarged for no apparent reason, and then showed us how these letters spelled out the date of the execution of 10 Nazis after the Holocaust. He continued to point out the similarities between the story of Purim written in the scroll of Esther, which is a tale of one man who tried to destroy the Jews, and the circumstances of the Holocaust, and the connections were mind-blowing. A third man used Einstein's theory of relativity, incorporating equations which I had learned about in my freshman seminar about Einstein's theories, to prove that the world was, indeed, created in 6 days and that we are currently living in the sixth day of creation. A fourth pointed to one passage in the Torah which describes an insect that has two different evolutionary characteristics; he asserted that the Torah thus predicts and describes evolution, because of one passage. When my group left Aish, we were speechless but uneasy because it seemed that we had just been presented with undeniable evidence about the Torah's divinity.

After receiving my certification to be a "peer educator," Rabbi Fleshel was tasked with helping me to find a group of interested students to teach my thoughts on the Jewish *mitzvah* of prayer. Fleshel's wife, Chana, and I decided to begin a weekly class that we would advertise as "working out both the mind and the body," because we planned to exercise together and then teach a class about Judaism. We held many of these classes in the chapter room of my sorority lodge because Chana's commitment to modesty prevents her from exercising at Emory's

Woodruff Physical Education Center, where men could see her. Most days we had only two other students who participated for the entire session, and Chana and I would lead a small group discussion about Jewish topics. Throughout the semester, my internship director planned Skype sessions for every intern from the program: all of us were instructed to “tune in” to the Skype discussion at a specified time, and we were invited to attempt certain challenges for monetary rewards. I never participated in the post-PERI Skype sessions, but I was informed that one of my co-participants had succeeded in winning money for taking pictures with objects that started with the letter “P,” the beginning of the acronym for the PERI internship. It was through these weekly sessions and the email updates that followed that I was kept informed of the projects the other students were doing on their campuses as “peer educators.” During my senior year, the PERI internship coordinator announced that two college students who met during my PERI program had become engaged; on her Facebook page, she called them the “first” PERI couple,

The summer after my sophomore year, I planned to have lunch with a friend I made on my first Israel trip who had postponed his acceptance to law school barely a month before the first day of class in order to spend two years at a *yeshivah* in Israel, sponsored by Meor. We had eaten dinner together in Jerusalem while I was in PERI; during our meal the previous January he remarked that Har Nof was not the ideal neighborhood for platonic co-ed dinners. He gestured toward a female patron and identified her as the daughter of one of the *yeshivah* rabbis; he was nervous that she would tell her father about his dinner with me. When we met in summer 2011, after a year in *yeshivah*, he was much different than the college graduate whom I had met when I was a freshman. He told me he did rigorous Talmudic learning at his *yeshivah* for long hours each day, and often he would not finish until 10:00 PM. It did not sound like the magical

lifestyle advertised by the speakers of Meor, but he made it clear that he thought he made the right decision by studying in Israel instead of going to law school. He also had been given many opportunities to observe the organizers of Meor programs when they were not interacting with participants. He told me he was surprised when he heard the way some staff members discussed participants of Meor programs at his *yeshivah*. They appeared to have been evaluating which students were most receptive to which lessons, and they knew who would be most interested in a follow-up program. He knew he had been recruited to study at *yeshivah*, but until he heard the staff members talking privately he had not anticipated how much strategy Meor and its affiliates invested in his decision-making process while he was pondering whether to go to *yeshivah*.

After spending my sophomore year of college and part of the following summer courting the Jewish outreach programs, I studied abroad in Sydney, Australia for the first semester of my sophomore year. My PERI internship coordinator contacted me toward the end of my semester to invite me to a Shabbat dinner in her native suburb in Sydney. It had been almost a year since I had seen her, and she spent most of the time telling me about the outreach programs and the promising recruits who had enrolled. She told me she would be starting a new program for more advanced people--"like you"--which would be completely different from PERI. She seemed to sense that I had become disenchanted with many of the programs at Neve, but she was not secretive about her goal to convince me to return to a Meor program; even though it was November, she asked if I would be willing to travel to Israel in late December for a program that she would subsidize. I declined her offer, but several women from Emory enrolled in her program, "Meor Vision."

When I returned to Emory for the second half of my junior year, I spent the first Shabbat of the school year at Rabbi Fleshel's house. Many of the other students at the table had just returned from a trip to Israel with Meor, and they talked excitedly about all the Jewish topics they learned about. Some of them were talking about becoming more "religious," and it seemed like a new cycle of kids was becoming influenced at Emory, in larger numbers. When I saw the number of new faces who were now participating in Maimonides and Meor's Israel trips, I still did not understand why Rabbi Fleshel continued to offer paid classes, free Shabbat dinners, and free trips to Israel to non-Observant Jews. It was clear that Meor was soliciting dozens of students each semester to learn about Orthodox Judaism, but the reason remained opaque.

The day I completed the PERI internship, I asked my internship coordinator why she was investing so many resources into Jewish learning for college students. We were sitting in her office, and she was reviewing my progress throughout the internship program. I confessed that I had not been receptive to many of the lessons taught during her program, and I added that I would not incorporate the beliefs taught at Neve into my life in the future. She objected, insisting that I observe the *mitzvot* I had learned because this was the only way for me to be a happy Jew. At that point I asked her why she was so concerned with convincing me to accept these lessons about Judaism.

"Because I love you and I care about you, and I know this is the right decision for you," she explained.

"But we only met three weeks ago," I argued, "How can you know what I need?"

She said, "Because I know you, and I know what you need."

"Do you even know how old I am?" I asked.



“You’re almost 22,” she responded without hesitating. Then she shuffled through her papers, looking for my file to answer my question. “Aren’t you?” she asked, after a pause.

She did not know my age--I was 19 at the time. But she was convinced that she *did*, in fact, “know” me because I was Jewish. Yet, I felt that my Jewish identity was immensely different than that of the Meor organizers.

What was her Jewish identity in relation to mine, and what did she--and all the other Meor professionals--want to accomplish by making our Jewish worlds converge?

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM**

Meor is the “elephant in the room,” a burgeoning force of Emory’s Jewish community that is becoming impossible to ignore, but it has yet to be acknowledged, addressed, and deconstructed. Since coming to Emory hardly five years ago, it expanded the scope of its programming and its clientele at an enviable rate--compared to Hillel and Chabad, Emory’s two other official Jewish campus organizations. The parents of Emory students, familiar with the Hillel and Chabad paradigms, have little knowledge of Meor because it is so new. The Jewish professors, too, are scratching their heads at the changing face of Jewish life. The students themselves, even those who are closest with the Meor organization at Emory, are not sure how to describe the equivocal behavior of this new Jewish group.

The Judaism to which I was exposed through Meor programming was unlike any I was taught in my Reform Jewish congregation from home. The lessons were initially completely foreign to me. The summer after my freshman year, upon returning from my first Meor Israel trip, I was certain Meor had disabused me of the calumny that my Reform congregation called “Judaism”; after my second Israel trip, disillusionment set in, and I became interested in investigating how Meor had convinced me that theirs was the most authentic “Judaism.” I decided to research “Orthodox Jewish outreach” at Emory University for my Senior Honors Thesis, to gain an understanding of the goals, strategies, measures of success, and implications of the Jewish organizations at Emory. Why did Meor offer to pay me to take a class about Judaism, and why do they want to subsidize my trips to Israel? How can an organization survive--and thrive--if it gives away more money than it makes, and recycles students every four years? Most

importantly, what are the authentic” notions of Judaism that these campus organizations present to Emory students, and how are they constructed?

The goal of this thesis is to illustrate the landscape of Jewish life at Emory, the missions and strategies of the organizations, and the teachers and participants. I want to unveil the “elephant in the room,” and pioneer the impending discourse that will inevitably be engendered by Meor’s influence on the next generation of Jewish college graduates. This endeavor requires me to provide a considerable inventory of the existing scholarly material relevant to my study.

## **Literature Review**

### **Toward an Understanding of “*Kiruv*”**

Recently, the quarterly journal *Klal Perspectives* released two publications about a practice known as “*kiruv*,” a Hebrew term denoting Orthodox Jews’ belief that “The entire purpose of existence is to be *mekarev* (“bringing close”) the Jewish people and humanity to Hashem” (Coopersmith). *Kiruv*, which has also been called “Orthodox Jewish outreach,” is generally considered a survivalist strategy of Orthodox American Jews, but Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald<sup>4</sup> dispels this understanding of *kiruv* in the Fall 2012 issue of *Klal Perspectives*: his submission begins, “WAKE UP AMERICA! The old and familiar ‘outreach’ paradigm of the past half-century no longer exists!” (Buchwald). In order to understand the current state of *kiruv*, it is necessary to examine how *kiruv* was initially conceived in America.

According to the Jack Wertheimer’s article, “The Outreach Revolution” (2013), the first *kiruv* organizations emerged in America after World War II. They were initially launched by

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<sup>4</sup> Perhaps no one is as knowledgeable as Buchwald, director of the former National Jewish Outreach Program, congregational rabbi of the Lincoln Square Beginners Service, and founding President of the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals

Modern Orthodox groups, “those Jews who rigorously follow the commandments but do not seek to separate themselves from the commercial and cultural life of the country,” and they targeted assimilating and intermarrying co-religionists. The first outreach programs were educational, meant for “teaching returning war veterans and Jewish children enrolled in public schools about traditional Jewish observance.” Today, Wertheimer estimates that between 5,000 and 7,000 men and women are devoted to *kiruv* efforts with non-Orthodox Jews in America; this figure “constitute[s] more than double the number of active Conservative, Reform, and all other permutations of liberal rabbis *combined*”; given these statistics, Wertheimer suspects that more than a half million people are “touched” by *kiruv* workers every year. Outreach workers “cast a wide net” for recruits, but “as these seekers move along from one program to the next, only a very small minority come out of the funnel as Orthodox Jews.” Yet, the number of affected Jews is not insignificant: Wertheimer says *kiruv* professionals estimate that approximately 2,000 “new recruits to Orthodoxy” are recorded annually, 30% of whom are speculated to be college students; Wertheimer postulates that each “successful recruit” requires more than three full-time “outreach workers.”

Outreach to Modern Orthodox Jews was supported, perpetuated, and subsequently redirected when the American “community kollel” was founded in the mid-20th century, according to Adam Ferziger’s article, “The Emergence of the Community Kollel: A New Model for Addressing Assimilation.” The kollel was first established in America because its founder, Aharon Kotler, “considered American Modern Orthodoxy...to be a dangerous misrepresentation of true Jewish values”; in order for “authentic Judaism to survive,” he claimed, “it was imperative to project a clear alternative to the synthetic version that had become so

prevalent” (Ferziger 29). The first kollelim were post-graduate programs that isolated young-- and frequently newly-married--*yeshivah* graduates from secular society; the “inreach-oriented community kollel of the 1970s was a reflection of a novel, but limited willingness of the American yeshiva world at that time to confront outside culture” (37). One of the “most intriguing phases in the history of the kollel in America,” Ferziger claims, was the establishment of the Atlanta Scholars Kollel, because it became “more proactive than its predecessors and would involve its fellows intensively in both ‘inreach’ and ‘outreach’” (45). Outreach to non-Orthodox Jews was an unprecedented interaction between the Orthodox enclave culture and the secular world.

Janet Aviad’s book *Return to Judaism* (1983) shows that in the 1970s, *kiruv* was imbued with fresh momentum when Israeli Orthodox Jewish learning institutions known as *yeshivot* began to cater to the flourishing group of newly Orthodox Jews: Baalei Teshuvah. Aviad’s was among the first publications to define the “contemporary Baal Teshuvah” (“BT”) as one who was raised in a society where “Judaism was neither an ethos nor a system lived and breathed from infancy and broken away from recently,” meaning the returnees did not come from Modern Orthodox circles (ix). Aviad’s study focuses on the emergence of BT sex-segregated Orthodox learning institutions in Israel, and she argues that these BT Israeli *yeshivot* and seminaries are locales where secular American Jews become radically observant. According to Aviad, these new educational institutions “adopted a recruiting method” that formed the basis for contemporary *kiruv* “not only because they had to secure students in order to establish a permanent body to guarantee the stability of the institution,” but also because the BT schools’ “self-defined mission demanded reaching out to areas where yeshivah students were not usually

found and using methods foreign to the traditional world” (Aviad 29). Aviad claims that the recruiting strategy used by these BT *yeshivot* was the feature that distinguished them from the “standard yeshivot,” which was exclusively for elite Orthodox students; Thus, *kiruv* programming for non-Orthodox Jews was conceived during the height of the BT movement of the late 20th century.

The appeal of Orthodox Judaism to secular college students was articulated in Herbert Danzger’s 1989 book *Returning to Tradition*, in which he conducted interviews and made observations at major Israeli BT *yeshivot* for both men and women in Jerusalem, to analyze the stages of “returning” that BTs undergo in these Israeli institutions (Danzger 9). In this book, Danzger, like Aviad, identifies the rise of Israeli BT *yeshivot* as “a uniquely Orthodox response to renewed interest in Judaism” (Danzger 99). He claims that at the end of the 20th century Jews attended college at three times the rate of the general population. He also asserts that Jews who entered American universities often “held many of the countercultural attitudes regarding drug use, life-style, political radicalism, the future of American society, and activism in left-oriented political movements”; as a result, Danzger concludes, “University experience enhanced most of these countercultural attitudes,” and “Involvement in Orthodox Judaism was another way of expressing an antiestablishment stance and at the same time coming to terms with ethnic identity” (Danzger 76-77). In this way, Danzger’s study illuminates the circumstances that propelled *kiruv* programming from the domain of the Modern Orthodox to secular college-aged students.

After Aviad and Danziger’s studies were published, two notable ethnographies that focus on women who have “returned” circulated in 1991. In *Rachel’s Daughters*, Debra Kaufmann

interviewed 150 female BTs in the 1980s in five urban areas throughout the United States to explore “the attitudes, values, experiences, and concerns of newly Orthodox women who have voluntarily entered the patriarchal world of Jewish orthodoxy” (Kaufman 2). Her research is focused on women of many ages who had already committed to their “return” and solidified their Jewish identity; she documents her interviewees’ memories of the process through which they “returned.” Similarly, in her book *Tradition in a Rootless World* (1991), Lynn Davidman complements Kaufman’s work by analyzing “how and why young, educated, secular Jewish women are attracted to religious communities that offer traditional definitions of gender and how these women are then resocialized into the community’s norms and way of life”--she accomplishes this by studying the experiences of women in Minnesota and Manhattan who “returned” to modern Orthodox and Lubavitch Hasidic sects of Judaism (Davidman 43). Davidman describes her research as “a study of conversion as a process of interaction and mutual influence between the women and the religious organizations and spokespeople who reached out and attempted to recruit them” (Davidman 46-47). The studies of “returning” women published in the same year convey the popularity of the BT movement during the 1990s, but the salient topic was the “return,” and not recruitment.

There is no current literature that accounts for the current state of campus *kiruv*; however, in *Flipping Out* (2009), Shalom Z. Berger analyzes the radical changes induced in American college-aged Jewish youth who enroll in one-year *yeshivah* programs in Israel between high school graduation and freshman year of college. According to Berger, at the end of the 20th century it was popular for “Students, away from their parents for an extended period for the first time” for the post-high school *yeshivah* study “assume the values of the *yeshiva*”(73). Many of

the students who return home become much more observant than their families, a state known as “Flipping Out.” “Flipping Out” is similar to the transformation experienced by college-aged BTs who are recruited through campus *kiruv*, but this book does not account for the evolving *kiruv* strategies because its focus is on Modern Orthodox high school graduates.

In *Tours That Bind* (2010), Shaul Kelner examines non-Orthodox Jewish programming offered to secular college students. Kelner evaluates the political implications of diaspora communities who tour the “homeland” of their nationalities, focusing on his own experience during a trip to Israel sponsored by Birthright. Kelner explains that Birthright was conceived in the 1990s “in the context of an American Jewish leadership increasingly concerned that its community was in decline and searching for ways to restore its vitality” (39). Birthright was among the first organizations that targeted secular Jewish college students by offering a free educational trip to Israel. However, these programs were not premised on an Orthodox religious agenda. Thus, when researching about Orthodox Jewish educational programs that pay secular college students, there is no pertinent academic literature; this phenomenon is still untouched.

Returning to *Klal Perspectives* and *Commentary Magazine*, the most recent amalgamation of scholarship about *kiruv*, the definition of the term is convoluted because of the recent innovations of ‘Orthodox Jewish outreach.’ My study of *kiruv* expands upon the definitions posited by Rabbi Yitzchok Feldman in *Klal Perspectives* (2012) and Jack Wertheimer in *Commentary Magazine* (2013): Feldman claims that “*kiruv*” is now distinct from “outreach.” “Outreach” programs, Feldman claims, are “general efforts to provide non-observant Jews with positive experiences of traditional Judaism”; Feldman defines *kiruv* as “efforts designed to facilitate a Jew’s sea-change commitment to Torah” (Feldman). When interacting with secular



Jewish youth, Feldman says *kiruv* professionals’ “obligation” is “to ensure that Judaism is part of their nascent, and fresh, framing of the world” (Feldman). Similarly, Wertheimer says, “For some purists, the term [*kiruv*] should be associated only with those who aim to bring non-observant Jews to Orthodoxy.” Calling *kiruv* an “all-or-nothing” presentation of Orthodox Judaism, Wertheimer also argues that contemporary *kiruv* is the domain of “non-Chabad outreach.”

### **Kiruv, Haredim & Scripturalism**

By “Non-Chabad outreach,” Wertheimer refers to the sect of Orthodox Jews that Samuel Heilman, in *Defenders of Faith* (1992) calls “Haredim.” This term refers to the union of two European Jewish sects that emerged in the late 18th century: *Hasidim*, who “emphasized that true piety” and had close ties to mysticism, and *Misnagdim*, their opponents “who remained convinced that only a rigorous and unyielding attachment to the Talmudists’ reading of the law constituted true Judaism” (Heilman 21-23). According to Heilman, in the twentieth century “Both [sects] became Orthodox Jews, and often most vigorously and radically Orthodox: haredim” (26).

Haym Soloveitchik, in his article, “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy,” (1994) proclaims, “If I were asked to characterize in a phrase the change that religious Jewry has undergone in the past generation, I would say that it was the new and controlling role that texts now play in contemporary religious life.” He marvels at the “explosion of halakhic works on practical observance,” a departure from the mimetic tradition accepted by prior Jewish generations. He concludes, “Significantly, this massive, critical audit did not emerge from the ranks of the left or centrist Orthodoxy, some of whose predecessors

might have justly been suspect of religious laxity, but from the inner sanctum of the haredi world, from the ranks of the Kollel Hazon Ish and the Lakewood Yeshivah,” an early Community Kollel. Soloveitchik suggests that the “rapid emergence of text culture” in the 1960s and 1970s throughout the Haredi and inreach kollel world was a way of reasserting difference in response to “the conjunction of third generation acculturation with the civil rights movement and with the decline of the Wasp ascendancy,” events that coincided with a period of dramatic increase in intermarriage. With European Jewry demolished and barriers to assimilation removed in America, the anxious Haredim only trusted the text as the source of authentic Jewish knowledge.

In *Orthodox By Design* (2010) Jeremy Stolow asserts that the increasing demand for printed versions of sacred books made by Artscroll is emblematic of the textual tradition reconstructed by contemporary Haredim. According to Stolow, these books deviated from the mimetic tradition because they include “radical changes in the ways authoritative interpretations of sacred texts are rendered and acted upon.” For contemporary Haredim, says Stolow, “Scripturalism refers not only to the unchallengeable authority of sacred Jewish texts as sources of knowledge but also to the ways Haredi knowledge seekers have accorded a commensurate form of authority to their teachers, the most trusted readers of those texts.” Stolow claims that the Artscroll guidebooks that are distributed to the Jewish public include only the most stringent interpretations of Jewish law; thus, “following the book” takes on a different meaning for Haredim, who did not follow the more lenient interpretations of Jewish law codified in Jewish texts. Furthermore, the “scripturalist impulse” Stolow attributes to the expansion of Haredi religious authority “beyond its originating enclave society” indicates that scripturalism is associated with Orthodox

“non-Chabad outreach” to secular Jews. Says, Stolow, “scripturalism must be *designed* in order to have effect.”

Based on the modified definition of *kiruv*, the novel approach to *kiruv* by Haredim, and the Haredi scripturalist impulse, it seems unlikely that Jewish groups who use the most stringent interpretations of laws are the most successful at winning over the hearts of secular college students. In order to make an Orthodox lifestyle palatable, *kiruv* uses several types of “selective scripturalism,” the strategic omission of portions of codified Jewish law as a strategy for enabling Jews to accept the entirety of Jewish law in a quantifiable way. In order for *kiruv* educators to quantify the progress, they gauge students’ religiosity by recording observable behavioral changes. Thus, *kiruv* educators “design” scripturalism so that it elicits observable behavior through forms of “selective scripturalism.”

When the Baal Teshuvah movement waned in the early twentieth century, so did the literature about “returnees.” In *Becoming Frum* (2012), Sarah Benor, a linguistics expert, claims that BTs’ “return” to can be measured by evaluating the degree to which BTs conform their speech patterns to match those of Orthodox Jews. She suggests that the process of “returning” involves four stages: first, the “interested prospective BT,” a non-Orthodox Jew, is identified by *kiruv* and exposed to educational programs; those who want to learn more after initial exposure Benor calls “peripheral BTs”: secular Jews who “increase their observance of Jewish laws and customs and currently identify as Orthodox Jews.” Peripheral BTs who go on to study in *yeshivah* or seminary and live in an Orthodox community complete the BT “trajectory.” Benor’s finding that “peripheral BTs” were the least linguistically socialized proves her hypothesis: the behavior of peripheral BTs indicates the degree to which they internalize the lessons.

### **Contemporary Campus *Kiruv*: “Returning” and “Departing”**

From this literature review, it is clear that scholarship pertaining to the situation of contemporary campus *kiruv* is multi-faceted: the flourishing enterprise of *kiruv* described by Wertheimer is an outgrowth of what Ferziger terms Orthodox “inreach,” which was directed toward Modern Orthodox Jews who were assimilating and intermarrying in the social circumstances of post-War America. The shift to “outreach” is evident in the changing structure of the Kollel that Ferziger attributes to the 1970s; during this time, according to Aviad, the BT seminaries and *yeshivot* that opened in Israel to accommodate the large numbers of Baalei Teshuvah, adopted a recruitment method in order to sustain these institutions. Some experiences of early returnees were documented in the ethnographies of Davidman and Kaufman. College students, Danzger argues, were a demographic that was particularly attracted to Orthodoxy because of the counter-cultural revolutions that erupted in the 1970s; similarly, Kelner and Berger analyze Jewish programming offered to college students at the end of the twentieth century. After the BT movement lapsed at the end of the 20th century, it was reborn, according to the *Klal Perspectives* and *Commentary Magazine* contributors, Feldman and Wertheimer, who contend that the renewed *kiruv* approach receive a new definition.

Contemporary *kiruv*, non-Chabad outreach, is initiating another wave of “return” to Orthodoxy; these new *kiruv* professionals hail from the ranks of the Haredim, the group analyzed by Heilman. Soloveitchik and Stolow identify the growing influence of “scripturalism,” or deference to strict textual laws, among Haredim. Thus, contemporary campus *kiruv* can be understood as an entreatment to “return,” or become a Baal Teshuvah. This conception of *kiruv* is a significant departure from conventional models of campus *kiruv*; while *kiruv* is results-

focused, campus “outreach” is input-oriented, meaning they present opportunities for Jewish participation but do not have behavioral expectations of students who participate in their programming.

Campus *kiruv* is focused on “return,” and it does this through a departure from traditional “outreach” models. In the first half of this thesis, I examine each Jewish campus organization’s history, goals, methods, and measures of progress; I conclude that while Hillel and Chabad are models of modern Jewish “outreach,” Meor represents contemporary campus *kiruv*. The second half of this thesis focuses on what *kind* of Jewish observance constitutes a “return” to tradition, using conclusions drawn from ethnographic fieldwork. “Returning” involves transposing secular behavioral norms with orthopraxies that meet Meor’s vision of authentic Jewish identity. Campus *kiruv* accomplishes this through a portrayal of “Torah-true” Judaism that uses strategic inclusion and omission of Jewish textual interpretation, “selective scripturalism,” a strategy that takes four different forms in this thesis.

Thus, the precepts that constitute “Judaism” can be found by examining individuals’ decisions to assume or resist particular taught behaviors. I argue that potential BTs’ decision-making process are influenced primarily by “gendered,” “feminist,” “selective,” and “hierarchical” constructions of “selective scripturalism.” These four types of scripturalism are different ways of strategically including and omitting portions of Jewish law in order to make the “product” that Meor is “selling” to potential and peripheral BT’s the most appealing, realistic, and manageable.

## Methodology

To discover what constitutes a return to “authentic” Judaism, it is vital to analyze the experiences of prospective and peripheral BTs for two reasons: first, because this is the demographic who are in the process of being exposed to Meor’s version of Judaism for the first time, and second, because prospective and peripheral BTs are deliberating whether they will accept it. In order to examine the experiences of prospective and peripheral BTs, I conducted an ethnographic study of Jewish life at Emory University during the 2012-2013 academic year. The specificity of the location of this study caters to what Lynn Davidman calls “the underlying assumption of ethnographic research”: “that a case study that pays close attention to a specific experience--even an exceptional one--reveals patterns and designs that pervade the larger picture as well” (Davidman 27). Rabbi Ilan Feldman, the head rabbi of Beth Jacob in Atlanta, echoes Davidman’s conviction when he writes in *Klal Perspectives*, “I suspect my shul,” which is the congregation that hosts Emory’s campus *kiruv*, and is the largest Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta--“and rabbinate are typical of the state of affairs in outreach to the unaffiliated in 2012” (Feldman).

Because of my two semesters of weekly Meor classes, the three *Shabbatons* in which I participated in the Toco Hills neighborhood of Atlanta, and the six weeks of immersion in the Israel programs, I combine my prior participation--denoted by my use of past tense in the Preface--with participant-observation fieldwork to produce the most significant data analyzed in this thesis. At this point, the obstacles often associated with the subjectivity of participant-observation must be acknowledged and confronted: ethnographic data is subject to being charged as the basis for specious claims because of the ethnographer’s “partiality,” and this is particularly

problematic for feminist ethnography; my “situatedness” is actually integral to the foundation of my research. As a former insider, my experiences motivated this study, shaped my questions, and made me want to invest my time into researching these Jewish groups. During my participation in Meor programming, I was between 18 and 21 years old, studying at one of the highest-ranked undergraduate institutions in the United States.

Between August 2012 and May 2013 I engaged in participant-observation of religious life at Emory and of the Jewish activities organized by Hillel, Chabad, and Meor at Emory University. The most important participant-observation that I conducted was attending the Shabbat dinners hosted by the three organizations. Shabbat is a holiday that Orthodox Jews celebrate weekly, and the dinners that Hillel, Chabad and Meor organize every Friday night consistently generate the highest turnout of students loyal to each respective Jewish group, and newcomers. It was at Shabbat that I met many of the men and women whom I interviewed for this study.

The Jewish activities I attended as a participant-observer were not limited to Shabbat: I also sat in on Chabad’s “lunch ‘n learns,” High Holiday services at Chabad and Hillel, Purim programming and other Jewish festivals. The Meor and Chabad directors agreed to let me attend their educational seminars, so I attended Meor’s Maimonides class, which pays \$300.00 to students for completing a semester-long weekly workshop, and Chabad’s Sinai Scholars class, which also rewards graduates with a \$350.00 stipend when the 10-week course concludes. By attending these functions, I developed a relationship with the rabbis of each organization and the students who frequent their venues. I did not receive stipends for these programs during my formal research, nor did I qualify for these rewards. As a student at Emory, I had access to

extensive participant-observation because of my complete immersion in the student community; therefore, my informal interactions with other students were relevant to my research as well.

My ethnographic research also includes interviews that I conducted with the faculty of Emory and the directors of Hillel, Chabad, and Meor. First, I interviewed Susan Henry Crowe in order to understand how these Jewish groups function in the landscape of Emory's religious life. I also interviewed professors of Jewish studies and alumni in order to learn more about the evolution of Jewish life at the University. Despite their demanding schedules, the rabbis who are the directors of Hillel, Meor, and Chabad allowed me to interview them several times about the programs that they organize and the goals that they hope to achieve on campus. The wives of the Chabad and Meor rabbis were another valuable resource; the input of these women helped me to understand the mission of their organization. After networking with Meor's staff at Emory, I also interviewed Menachem Deutsch, the North American coordinator of college *kiruv*. The outreach staff whom I interviewed were gracious about helping me to make this ethnography a success, and they generously provided assistance that I requested.

This ethnography would not be complete without the information that I gathered from Emory students who have varying degrees of affiliation with Hillel, Chabad, and Meor. Throughout my participant observation on campus I was introduced to several students who were becoming more religious, and I use the personal experiences of five as the basis of my conclusions. My interviews with these individuals were recorded on I-Phone and I-Pad applications and transcribed onto my computer, and I omitted only conversational digressions or discussion that led to naming individuals. Except for readily identifiable public figures, I have



substituted pseudonyms for all of the people with whom I worked, indicated by an asterisk next to their name the first time it appears.

### **Mapping The Thesis**

In order to understand how *kiruv* functions at Emory, it is necessary to briefly elaborate on the historical and social conditions that propelled this religious movement to function in the Emory Jewish community. This first chapter reviewed the literature available for the academic study of campus *kiruv*, and justified the need for more scholarly research that is specific to college recruitment of secular Jews to Orthodox Judaism. Using the relevant literature about *kiruv*, I chose to focus on the differences between “outreach” and “*kiruv*” that have become a prominent feature on Emory’s campus. I also introduced the concepts of “scripturalism” and how they can be used to create a theory about the goals, methods and strategies of Meor.

In Chapter One, I identify the Jewish organizations that are active at Emory University during the 2012-2013 school year. I provide histories of Hillel, Chabad, and Meor--the three Jewish organizations at Emory--on the national level, followed by descriptions of each group’s development at Emory University, and the goals that each director communicates for his respective organization on campus. The process through which Emory’s Jewish life transformed from a campus lacking a single Jewish group to a university with three official Jewish organizations is crucial for understanding *kiruv* at Emory University. I conclude that 1) the goals of Hillel and Chabad are “outreach”-oriented, by the modified definition, and 2) Meor is the only organization that explicitly endeavors to transform the religious identities of students, and thus it is a *kiruv* organization--according to Feldman’s definition.

Chapter Two is devoted to assessing the strategies that each Jewish organization utilizes to realize its goals, and the methods used to measure success. I discuss the programs offered by each Jewish group, and I present how each campus group measures success using my interviews with the rabbis, who are the directors of each Jewish group. I conclude that Hillel and Chabad's measures of success render them "outreach" organizations, while Meor's demonstrate that it is entirely "*kiruv*"-oriented. Finally, I use my interview with Rabbi Deutsch, the man who oversees all Meor programs in North America, to demonstrate the numbers-oriented approach of contemporary *kiruv*. Since *kiruv* has not been examined thoroughly by the scholarly community, the remainder of the thesis focuses on Meor and its effect on Jewish participants at Emory.

In Chapter Three, I deconstruct the pedagogical methods that Meor educators employ to teach "authentic" Jewish tradition. Because of the gender-segregated learning, I was exposed predominantly to the teaching style that targets secular women. At the seminary where classes are held for women, *tznius* ("modesty") was the topic that was most frequently addressed by Meor educators. From the lessons taught about modesty in formal and informal class settings, I construct two theories of *kiruv* pedagogy: "gendered scripturalism," which links Jewish identity with narrow interpretations of gendered behaviors, and "feminist scripturalism," the use of textual references that exaggerate the agency of Orthodox women and the omission of portions of the text that debase women. The guidance and instruction given to each student demonstrates the operational strategy of Meor in non-abstract terms.

In Chapter Four, I use my recorded interviews to present five "portraits" of Emory students who have participated in more than half of available Meor programs: namely, at least one Maimonides class and at least one Meor Israel trip. Every student in these "portraits"

represents the “peripheral BTs” described by Benor in *Becoming Frum*: each student chose to pursue further Meor educational opportunities after they were exposed to Meor’s introductory program. By supplementing the Emory Meor Rabbi’s goals, stated in Chapter Two, with the students’ “narratives,” this chapter illuminates how Meor is received by its student targets.

This is the story of *kiruv* at Emory, and it begins to unfold in Chapter One.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **OVERVIEW: JEWISH LIFE IN ATLANTA & EMORY**

Although “Some hostility to Jews had existed from their first landing in New Amsterdam” when “Jews were so few in number that they went almost unnoticed,” around the end of the 19th century, “the rise of nationalism and acceptance of social Darwinism fed an emerging racism that became much more threatening as the Jewish population grew” in the United States (Danzger 22). At the peak of American anti-Semitic fervor, Atlanta became a national icon for America’s prejudices against Jews. The icon of anti-Semitic activity in Atlanta was the 1913 conviction of a Jew named Leo Frank, in spite of the absence of supporting evidence for his crime: Frank was alleged to have murdered an employee of his uncle’s pencil factory, and while he was in prison a mob kidnapped and lynched the Jewish convict. According to Danzger, this event stimulated an increased presence of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) in Stone Mountain, an area outside Atlanta. The KKK operated through a platform that promoted hatred of people of “different” ethnicities, and during the 1920s membership reached an all-time high (Danzger 22). At the height of anti-Semitism in Atlanta, in 1958, the Reform synagogue called The Temple was bombed by white supremacists (“Atlanta”).

Emory University, founded in 1836 as a Methodist institution, is remembered as an unpleasant climate for Jews enrolled in the dental school. From 1948 until 1961, 65% of Jewish students in Emory’s dental school program either failed or were forced to repeat coursework under the dean of Emory’s dental school, John Buhler (*From Silence To Recognition*). The rogue dean resigned after the regional director of the Anti-Defamation League alerted Emory’s dean of faculty to a form that Buhler had disseminated to students, which asked them to identify as

“Caucasian,” “Jewish,” or “other.” According to Perry Brickman’s documentary “From Silence to Recognition,” Emory maintained a quota to limit the number of Jews accepted to the University.

### **Growth of Jewish Population at Emory: Dean Buhler’s Day Off**

Not only has Atlanta transformed from a town infamous for maltreatment of its Jewish citizens, but it has become the home to growing communities of observant Jews. The religious sentiment in America during the 1950s welcomed Judaism into the “Triple Melting Pot” of ethical monotheism, which William Herberg summarized in his 1960 book, *Protestant--Catholic--Jew*. As social barriers between Jews and mainstream American society evaporated after the Holocaust, Orthodox synagogues throughout the United States transposed into Conservative and Reform Jewish congregations. In Atlanta, several Orthodox synagogues were converted. In 1947, Orthodox Jewish leaders of Atlanta established Beth Jacob, an Orthodox *shul* in downtown Atlanta, and at that time “there was no way of predicting how this synagogue would change the Jewish character of Atlanta” or Emory (“Atlanta”). In the 1960s, Beth Jacob relocated to Toco Hills, a neighborhood within walking distance from Emory University; Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, the congregational rabbi until 1992, “was able to build a community of Sabbath observers, many of whom taught at the university and worked at what is now known as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention” at Emory (“Atlanta”). Thus, Beth Jacob established formal ties with Emory when it moved to Toco Hills.

It was 1987 when Atlanta became the site of what Ferziger claims was a “watershed event”: Rabbi Feldman of Beth Jacob helped to coordinate the establishment of the Atlanta Scholars Kollel (ASK). In the Fall 2012 issue of *Klal Perspectives* Rabbi Epstein, the director of

a similar kollel in Dallas, Texas, explains the impact of ASK when he writes, “In 1992, there were only a handful of community kollelim in existence, and all but one were established primarily to serve Orthodox communities. The one exception was Atlanta” (Epstein). One Atlanta newspaper explains the kollel provides “collegial support, model[s] a spiritually committed lifestyle” and shares “the beauty of Judaism with Georgians who might never set foot in an Orthodox shul” (“Atlanta Scholars Kollel At 25”). With the creation of the first outreach kollel, the right-wing, Orthodox graduates of the *yeshivot* discussed by Ferziger forged a connection with non-Orthodox Jews of the Emory community. Because of their partnership with kiruv-oriented ASK, at Beth Jacob there are so many “returnees” that “*baalei teshuva* are the ones creating the infrastructure that then attract [Frum From Births]” (Edelstein); thus, with the establishment of ASK, Atlanta became what Edelstein calls a “kiruv city,” meaning *baalei teshuvah* became the foundation for Atlanta’s Orthodox Jewish population.

Many students and faculty members describe the current circumstances of Jewish life at Emory University by invoking an acronym for EMORY: “Early Methodist Only Recently Yiddish.” The Jewish student body at Emory remained small until the 1950s, when it was “estimated that between 150 and 175 [Jewish] students were enrolled at all Emory University schools; by the 1990s, Jewish students constituted 30-40% of the 5,500 undergraduates enrolled at Emory (“Atlanta”). Today, Emory University boasts a Jewish population that exceeds 2,000 students, and Jewish students comprise approximately 30% of the undergraduate student population (“Hillel Emory FAQ”). Emory’s Jewish population has grown so significantly that in 2012, Emory’s Jewish student body was the tenth highest among American Universities in 2012 (“2012 Top 60”).

1976 was a pivotal year for Jewish life at Emory: first, “parallel to the student growth” within Emory’s Jewish population “was the faculty growth both in academic Judaica and general academia” (“Atlanta”); second, the year that Emory began offering Jewish classes was the same year that Dean Buhler died. After Judaica classes came to Emory, Jewish life exhibited remarkable growth; in 1999 Emory formally established the Tam Institute for Jewish Studies to give “institutional recognition to the university’s strength in the study of Jewish life and culture”; this event “signaled Emory’s intention to become the premier site for Jewish Studies in the southeastern United States” (“Undergraduate Jewish Studies”). By 2004 “there were 12 full-time faculty members teaching in all areas of Judaica” (“Atlanta”). The establishment of the Tam Institute and the presence of notable Jewish Studies professors across the university made Emory more attractive for prospective Jewish students, creating an educational environment that prioritized Jewish learning. Today, Emory’s faculty has many notable Jewish figures, among them Michael Broyde, who was among the candidates considered for the post of Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom.

The expansion of organizations and courses available to the Emory Jewish population in the late 20th century was bolstered by the establishment of three Jewish groups at the beginning of the 21st Century: Hillel, Chabad, and Meor. In this chapter, I will discuss the national origins of each of these Jewish movements in the order that they appeared on Emory’s campus. After analyzing the birth, influence, and goals of Hillel, Chabad, and Meor, I will explain how each group came to Emory, how each envisions their goals at this University.

## **Hillel: Overview Of National Organization**

Hillel is the largest Jewish campus organization in the world, with a presence at more than 500 higher learning institutions and a global network of regional centers, campus foundations and Hillel student organizations. Their mission is “to enrich the lives of Jewish undergraduate and graduate students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world”; and they are “dedicated to creating a pluralistic, welcoming and inclusive environment for Jewish college students, where they are encouraged to grow intellectually, spiritually and socially” (“About Hillel”). The billion-dollar Hillel corporation that exists today was spawned from humble ancestry. In 1923, Benjamin Frankel articulated the concept of a Hillel that would “provide a structure that brought together a variety of student-run opportunities on a permanent basis under the guidance of a professional” (Rubin). In order to acquire secure financial support, Frankel appealed to the B’nai B’rith foundation for funding, and the aid from this foundation became crucial to Hillel’s outreach initiatives.

B’nai B’rith was founded in 1843 by German-Jewish immigrants in New York City’s Lower East Side who protested the “deplorable” condition of American Jews. Named after a Hebrew phrase that translates to “children of the covenant” in English, this organization’s initial goals were to provide American Jews with humanitarian aid and service. During the 1800s, B’nai B’rith was credited with establishing the first Jewish community center in the United States and the first Jewish public library in America; this group also pioneered several projects abroad during the nineteenth century, including fundraising for victims of a cholera epidemic in Palestine and the establishment of an American consulate in Romania to battle anti-Semitism in



the region (“B’nai B’rith About Us”). B’nai B’rith supported Frankel’s establishment of Hillel at the University of Illinois, and it immediately directed Frankel to open Hillel at the University of Wisconsin; by 1926 Hillel had also spread to Ohio State and the University of Michigan (Rubin).

When Abram L. Sachar became the first full-time national director of Hillel in 1933, he created an organization that worked closely with B’nai B’rith and Jewish Federations, and Hillel became an instrumental force in Jewish students’ collegiate experiences. After Israel’s victory in the 1967 six-day war, despite dire predictions of defeat, American Jews on college campuses rallied around political issues relating to Israel advocacy and civil rights; Hillel helped students support causes that benefitted Soviet Jewry, Israel, Jewish feminism, Ethiopian Jewry, and even the environment (Rubin). However, according to the article “Road to Renaissance,” by 1988 Hillel’s future was challenged by cutbacks to their budget, and their tremendous growth appeared to dwindle--temporarily.

According to Hillel’s Director of Communications, Jeff Rubin, “Since an estimated 85% of American Jews attended college, Hillel was a logical antidote to the rising incidence of intermarriage, and their mission became focused on “maximizing the number of Jews doing Jewish with other Jews” (Rubin). In 1994, Jewish leaders assisted Hillel’s mission by creating a Board of Directors--lay leaders, students, professionals, federations, B’nai B’rith-- to oversee the organization. When Edgar Bronfman became the chairman of the newly formed Hillel International Board of Governors, he undertook a mission to “provoke ‘Jewish renaissance’” in order to “reawaken our knowledge of Judaism and by doing so, to reawaken our pride” (Rubin). Michael Steinhardt became co-chair of the Board of Governors in 1994, and he and his wife began a fellowship that hired staff to work on campus with the goal of engaging uninvolved

Jewish students. Hillel was also instrumental in the formation of the Birthright Israel program, and helped to bring over ten-thousand Jewish students to Israel in the first three years after its inception (Rubin). Thus, in its effort to revive American Jewry after 1990, Hillel itself experienced a renewed energy and began to expand its influence once again.

Hillel is recognized as the national “umbrella body for all Jewish organizations on the 110 campuses where it maintains permanent staff” (Fishkoff 98). Today, Hillel is an international organization with more than 600 professionals who answer to the national headquarters. This group continues to exhibit tremendous growth by erecting new buildings, renovating old buildings, and hiring more staff. They provide religious and social programming, and their staff is dedicated to meeting the religious needs of students who hail from all Jewish denominations.

### **Chabad: Overview Of National Organization**

Chabad is a Hebrew acronym for *Chochmah* (“wisdom”), *Binah* (“comprehension”), and *da’at* (“knowledge”); these are the pillars of Chabad’s religious philosophy, which teaches a person to refine or govern his or her every act and feeling through wisdom, comprehension, and knowledge (“About Chabad”). The contemporary American Chabad movement is understood to have originated in the city of Lubavitch, (“Love”) Poland; the Chabad community claims that this name invokes the responsibility and love Chabad aims to direct toward every Jew. The Chabad movement originated in Russia almost 250 years ago when the *Baal Shem Tov* (“master of good name”), Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, launched the first dynasty of Lubavitch-Chasidim, which promotes spirituality to all types of Jews and promotes the study of *Kabbalah*, known in English as a form of Jewish mysticism (Fishkoff). In the social setting of Russian *shtetls* where Eastern European Jews lived at this time, the availability of synagogues, like many other

resources for Jewish life, privileged those in higher social classes. The *Baal Shem Tov* circulated Chasidic philosophy to eliminate these social barriers between Jews.

After the succession of five leaders of the Chabad movement, who were known as “Rebbes,” the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, brought Chabad to America during World War II. When he appointed his successor, his son-in-law Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, to lead Chabad’s educational and social service sectors, the contemporary Chabad movement in America began to take shape. Rabbi Schneerson arrived in Crown Heights, New York in 1941, having escaped the persecution of Jews during the Holocaust. He endeavored to continue the first Rebbe’s enduring mission to extinguish the social barriers that divided Jews, evident in the elitism exhibited by Jewish scholars. For this reason, Schneerson is known as “The Rebbe” of the current generation of Chabad followers, and the Chabad community considers him “undoubtedly, the one individual more than any other singularly responsible for stirring the conscience and spiritual awakening of world Jewry” (“About Chabad-Lubavitch”).

According to Jeffrey Shandler, in Eastern Europe as well as post-war America, “Lubavitcher hasidim have evolved a culture distinguished not only by its singular spiritual vision but also by its uses of media” (Shandler 230). By pairing their innovative mission to spread Jewish learning with an eagerness to embrace “new” media, the Lubavitch sect was a formidable force in spreading Jewish thought. This was first evident with Chabad’s use of the printing press to disseminate the foundational text of their theology written by the *Baal Shem Tov*. Upon arriving in America, Chabad continued to take advantage of print media by circulating periodicals. Chabad leaders’ proficiency in “new” media was evident in their

circulation of traditional Jewish melodies and their dissemination of images of Rebbes as early as the 19th century (Shandler). During the second half of the 20th century, Chabad continued to incorporate media into its outreach by utilizing television and video to spread its message, and today Chabad.org, Chabad's national website, is "currently the single largest and most frequently visited Jewish website, internationally," while the Chabad *Jewish Learning Institute* is the largest network of adult education "and has revolutionized Torah learning" (Eliezie 20).

Due to Chabad's incorporation of "new media," it has been concluded that "whereas other hasidim tend to circumscribe contact between members of their communities and less observant Jews, Chabad has made outreach to potential *baalei-t'shuvah* central to its mission" during the second half of the 20th century (Shandler 239). Chabad was responsible for opening "Hadar Hatorah," the world's first *yeshivah* for *baalei teshuvah*, in Brooklyn in 1962. Thus, Chabad was among the first of the Orthodox Jewish sects who initiated contact with non-observant Jews.

As outreach to *baalei teshuvah* became a priority for "Chabadniks," the seventh Rebbe--who was given this title after the sixth Rebbe died--established a global network of *shluchim*, Chabad emissaries who settle around the world to bring Jews closer to their religious heritage. The emissaries reside in Chabad Houses that are constructed to provide a Jewish community center in communities that Chabad identifies as in need of spiritual guidance. These *shluchim* couples cater to the specific needs of the local Jewish community in which they reside. The Chabad House became the center of all local educational and outreach initiatives of Chabad during the 20th century.

The Chabad on Campus International Foundation, established in the 1960s, coordinated the construction of Chabad Houses to house *shluchim* couples on college campuses throughout America. With the recent assistance of the Rohr Family Foundation, Chabad's Campus Foundation "coordinates staff placement, training and logistical support, and centralized student programming such as national *Shabbatons*, Alternative Spring Break service trips, Summer learning and touring adventures and student leadership retreats" ("About Chabad on Campus"). Chabad on Campus partners with Birthright's Mayanot program to fund one of their most popular trips--which enrolls approximately 30,000 students--with Chabad rabbis as chaperones.

According to Rabbi Eliezrie in "The Unique Model and Success of Chabad,"

"On campuses throughout North America, tens of thousands of students participate annually in the over 175 full-time Campus Chabad Centers, tens of thousands of younger children attend the over 350 Hebrew Schools and Gan Israel summer camps. As this demographic matures, marries and builds their families, we expect that they will tend to affiliate with Chabad and other Orthodox institutions, even though most will not become fully observant" (Eliezrie).

Chabad was the cornerstone of campus *kiruv* until the 21st century, when non-Chabad outreach began to proliferate.

### **Meor: Overview Of National Organization**

Although "prior to six or seven years ago, there were almost no non-Chabad *kiruv* professionals on campus," by the twenty-first century, the college campus was the site of Chabad *shluchim* and also outreach professionals from a new non-Chabad campus group called Meor (Koretzky). In 2005, Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld of Philadelphia outlined a program that would redesign campus *kiruv*, and he called it Meor, which means "illumination." In 2006, he implemented Meor Jewish leadership programs on four different campuses; the programs

enjoyed such immense success that by 2012, “due to demand from students,” the program had expanded to 17 other campuses (“Meor Impact”).

Meor receives funding from private donors, other programs that serve American Jewish college students, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs; their sources of financial support for the year 2011-2012 listed 45% of their income from foundation grants, 41% from individual gifts, 11% from subsidies for Israel trips, and 3% from student contributions for Israel trips. Their outreach model aims to bring “relevant, inspiring, powerful and sophisticated Jewish learning to college students” (“Impact”). Meor’s strategy is five-fold: first, it focuses on American campuses with significant Jewish student enrollment; second, it identifies students who show promise of becoming future leaders; third, it provides these students with leadership development and text-based learning; fourth, Meor organizes learning-oriented trips to Israel to augment campus study; finally, the Meor staff provides continued support to participants throughout their college career and after graduation (“Meor Mission”).

Meor is established on campuses mainly on the East coast, and according to Rabbi Fleshel, they are now present on 75 university campuses (Fleshel). Meor records their impact meticulously: this year, the “impact” section of Meor’s website recorded over 3,700 program participants; since their founding, they have recorded 12,000 participants in their Jewish learning programs, and they have brought more than 1,800 students to Israel for their learning programs. About 500 students around the nation come to Meor Shabbat dinners each week, hosted by 43 full-time educators on college campuses. Meor boasts that 22 singles have wedded a Meor spouse since the year 2010 (“Dashboard”). While Hillel and Chabad reinvented their national outreach agendas at the end of the twentieth century, from its inception Meor’s national agenda

has been consistently focused on transforming Jewish education and practice in American universities.

## **Subsidiaries at Emory**

### **1. Hillel at Emory**

Hillel was founded at Emory in 1948, when Emory was an all-men's Baptist University and students attended mandatory church services every Sunday. Hillel was part of campus Christian organization; in fact, in the 1950s the president of this Christian group was Jewish. The first Hillel house was a wooden abode on Clifton Road that hosted "traditional" and Reform services; sometimes they used the Glenn Memorial building for their programming as well. There was no rabbi at Hillel until the late 1970s, so rabbis were brought from the Atlanta Jewish community to lead the services; the first Emory Hillel rabbi was named Judah Mintz. During the 1980s that Jonathan Feldstein, president of Hillel, rallied the students of Emory to rescue a Soviet Jew named Kate Shtein who had been persecuted by the government (Kandel). His efforts reflected the social concerns of Hillels throughout the nation: "Spurred by pride in Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, Jewish students created groups that championed causes from Soviet Jewry to Israel, Jewish feminism to chavurot, Ethiopian Jewry to the environment" ("Road to Renaissance").

During the 1980s, Emory Hillel was unable to find another rabbi who would serve the campus full-time. The local Jewish Federation created a committee to assess the situation of Emory Hillel, and they concluded that they would dissociate with Hillel at Emory (Brickman). In its stead, the Federation founded Atlanta YAD, Jewish Young Adult Programming, in 1991.

Perry Brickman, the president of the Federation from 1990-1992, was the first president of Atlanta YAD (Brickman).

The former Atlanta YAD house faces the current Hillel building. Originally, Atlanta YAD served as the “campus synagogue,” and it responded to the religious needs and concerns of Jewish students. When YAD’s Rabbi Felstein resigned in 2002, the new rabbi solicited the funding for a Hillel subsidiary to replace Atlanta YAD at Emory. The next phase of Hillel at Emory cycled through several rabbis; eventually Michael Rabkin, a Jewish lay leader, was appointed director of Hillel in 2005, and he resigned in 2011. Rabbi Shlomo Gelbtuch, along with others from the Atlanta Scholars Kollel, filled the vacuum by working at Emory part-time.

The year 2010 heralded the construction of the Marcus Hillel Center, which was designated as the home for Hillel at Emory and Hillels of Georgia. The 10,500 square-foot building features a kosher cafe, a student center with computers and worktables, a living room with a television, a Jewish resource center, and professional offices (“Emory Marcus”). More than 80% of the \$9.2 million required for the building’s construction was donated by members of the Atlanta Jewish community, and it took almost a decade to raise these funds. After the Center was introduced to Emory, Hillel became the central location for Jewish life at Emory and for other Hillels of Georgia, whether to serve religious, social, or educational purposes.

**Goals: “We don’t care about any theological issues”**

The Hillel staff frequently changes, it is currently directed by an Orthodox Rabbi named Russ Shulkes, who was hired as the Executive Director of Hillels of Georgia at the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic year. He became a full-time Hillel staff member after years of



experience teaching Comparative Religion at Florida International University and working in Jewish campus life in Scotland.

At first when I asked Rabbi Shulkes if he could articulate his goals, he told me to check the Emory Hillel website. Then he mentioned that one of his major goals is getting students to go to Birthright. “I have two goals for Birthright experience: self identity, meaning they marry Jewish. And second, that they love the land of Israel. We don’t care about any theological matters. We only care about concretizing identity.” The goals listed on Emory Hillel’s website state that Hillel is intended to be “a launching pad for Jewish activity, catering to the diverse interests of student” and “outstanding social, cultural, religious and community service programs” (“Our Mission”). Clearly, Rabbi Shulkes’ concern with providing positive Jewish experiences is consistent with contemporary campus “outreach.”

### **Chabad at Emory**

Miriam Lipskier, co-director of Emory Chabad, explains that in 1995 Chabad’s national headquarters sent Rabbi Eliyahu Shusterman to coordinate activities part-time, but it quickly became apparent that Shusterman needed help handling the responsibility of Chabad at Emory. Around the year 2000, Chabad sent Rabbi Zalman Lipskier to start a Chabad House at Emory. “Zalman was a *yeshivah* student, and he was one of the rabbinical students in training who was brought to campus to help Shusterman. Then, Rabbi Shusterman asked Zalman to take over,” says Miriam. According to Susan Henry Crowe, Dean of Religious Life at Emory, Chabad’s National office contacted Emory University and requested that Chabad be permitted to enter Emory’s religious life. Chabad encountered several problems after it was formed at the University. First, when Chabad tried to work with Atlanta YAD, according to Henry Crowe,

“there were a lot of philosophical differences, and Hillel was not particularly welcoming because Hillel in this community had held sort of the prized position of being the umbrella for all Jewish groups on campus.”

Once Rabbi Lipskier created a campus Chabad, Henry Crowe recalls asking the group to leave because they were not abiding by certain Emory policies, such as the school’s rule against serving alcohol to minors. While they were off-campus, Rabbi Lipskier married the future co-director of Emory Chabad, Miriam, and the two bought a house at the edge of Emory Village, which is adjacent to the University. Susan Henry Crowe granted Chabad recognition after they purchased the house, but the Chabad couple’s problems were not over. When Rabbi Feldstein resigned, Miriam says, the new Atlanta YAD rabbi was antagonistic toward Chabad, and he converted Atlanta YAD into Hillel to get funding to fuel the rivalry. Miriam describes how challenging it was for Chabad to get sufficient funding, which comes solely from students, parents, friends, and alumni. “People sometimes ask, ‘Why don’t you ask Chabad for a bigger kitchen?’ There is no central organization that supports us; every Chabad House is self-sufficient,” the Lipskiers told me the first time I met with them at their house.

**Goals: “If you have a soul, you have a question about it”**

Emory Chabad’s mission, according to their website, is to provide “a place where Jews of all backgrounds and degrees of observance can enjoy exploring their Jewish heritage in a warm, welcoming and non-judgmental environment” (“Chabad Vision and Impact”). I had been to Chabad for High Holidays services and Shabbat dinners several times, but there were usually so many other students at the events with me that I rarely had a personal interaction with either of the Lipskiers. When I met with Zalman and Miriam Lipskier for the first time, we sat at their

kitchen table in their Chabad House. I talked very little during the hour that we met because they were eager to tell me about their organization and their mission for Emory. I met with Miriam Lipskier again in February for a one-on-one conversation, after I sat in on her weekly “Lunch ‘n Learn,” to ask more specific questions about the programming Emory Chabad provides. Miriam told me that both of her parents became observant Jews while in college because they had developed a strong relationship with their campus Chabad House. “These kids who come through my house--sometimes hundreds of people come through here in one night--and I always think, ‘these kids could be my parents, looking to discover what it means to be Jewish.’” Miriam feels that she is “completing the cycle” of her parents’ legacies by offering programs for Emory students that she hopes will help them to “explore” Judaism.

Since she and Zalman received approval to establish a Chabad House for Emory in 2000, both the number of programs they have organized and their student clientele have multiplied. Miriam and Zalman told me that one of the most important reasons they are successful is their on-going presence at their Chabad House: “The student body changes every four-years with the graduation cycle, the directors of other student groups change every couple of years, but our mission is always the same,” Miriam explained to me in February. “We don’t have an *agenda*, except to be an address where people can explore Judaism. Our goal is not to send people to *yeshivah* so they can do the same things I do,” she says, motioning around her dining room, which is decorated with photos of famous Rebbes and Kabbalistic spellings of “Chabad” in Hebrew. “Everyone should experience Judaism in their own way, and they should make changes that work for them. It’s all about what *you* want, not about what I think you need, or what I think

you want.” The Lipskiers’ role in university Jewish life, Miriam says, is “to be an asset to Jewish kids on campus, however they want to take advantage of us.”

“If you have a soul,” says Miriam, referring to the concept that all Jews have an inner Jewish soul, “you have a question about it. In college, you’re figuring out, ‘What am I going to be? What am I going to devote myself to for the rest of my life? What makes me, and how is it linked to my Jewish heritage?’ People have those questions naturally.” Chabad has many programs that they hope will enlighten Jewish students about their religion, and during a typical week the Lipskiers plan at least one Jewish event each day. Emory Chabad, with their emphasis on providing positive Jewish experiences, is clearly a model of contemporary campus “outreach.”

## **Meor at Emory**

### **Founding:**

When Meor first came to Emory in Fall 2008, Susan Henry Crowe recalls that they existed in a partnership with Hillel before they were granted independent recognition. Rabbi Yaakov Fleshel, the director of Meor at Emory, explains that “at some point, Meor was interested in bringing a rabbi to Emory, but they did not want to compete with the kollel (ASK) rabbi. Then they made an agreement with the kollel to send someone to campus.”

Funded partly by private donors, Meor at Emory also relies heavily on the National Meor budget. Rabbi Yaakov Fleshel, the Executive Director, and his wife, Hannah, the Marketing Director, facilitate Meor programs both in their home, at Beth Jacob’s congregation, in homes in the Atlanta Jewish community during Shabbat, and at the Marcus Hillel Center. Rabbi Fleshel, an Orthodox Rabbi from South Africa, works closely with the Atlanta Scholars’ Kollel: each day,

Rabbi Fleshel studies at the Atlanta Kollel before resuming his duties at Emory University because Rabbi Deutsch requires all Meor staff members to continue to learn in order to be competent to teach students.

**Goal: “Everything is centered around education, learning, and integration of what is learned”**

The Emory Meor website says the group’s mission is “to inspire a life-long love affair with Jewish learning and living” through “timely classes, lively discussions, transformative trips, and other programming” (“Meor at Emory’s Mission”). I have known Rabbi Fleshel since I applied to the Meor Israel trip before the spring semester of my freshman year began. I visited his house for Shabbat regularly during my freshman and sophomore years, and occasionally during my junior and senior years. My relationship with Rabbi Fleshel and his family, who live in Clifton Heights, across from Emory’s medical school and next to Lullwater park, has allowed me many opportunities to understand Rabbi Fleshel’s goals for his Meor programming. In January 2013 his wife, Chana, agreed to help me with my research by speaking to me on the phone about her role in Meor at Emory while she did laundry for her four children. “The idea of *kiruv* means to draw people close: the goal is not to make people Orthodox, it’s to make people more Jewish,” she explains during our conversation. College, Chana tells me, “is the time when people are going to change and grow[...]someone who is married and 40 years old with a 10-year-old kid is not going to be able to change and grow, and do what a 20-year-old could do. So, people invest more in college because this is the time when you don’t have those obligations.”

In February 2013, I interviewed Rabbi Fleshel personally so that he could explicitly state his motives for Meor programming. We sat in the library of the Hillel building, and I asked him

about his goals for the programs I had already completed throughout my college career:

Maimonides I, Meor Israel, Maimonides II, PERI, Meor Plus and Meor Vision. “Everything is centered around more and more education, learning, and integration of what is learned,” Fleshel begins. “The goal of Maimonides I is to get the students interested in Judaism and in our trip to Israel, in continued learning. That could mean doing Shabbat the way we taught them and learning with me. We want to be distinct from other organizations by the amount of education we put in. We want to educate people about Judaism. Judaism is not only taught through learning, but it’s taught through Shabbos, programs and trips. I have 6 Maimonides programs, many other learning programs, but learning is only part of education. *Shabbatons* are education, Israel trips are education, the speakers we bring in, even if they don’t talk about religion, are educational.”

Rabbi Fleshel goes on to explain what “Judaism” means to him. “I’m talking about tradition. Of keeping *shabbos*, and *tefillin*, that 100 years ago we always did, and it’s been done through generations, and it has defined us as being Jewish. My job is to get people into programs and to teach. I spent a lot of time breaking down the misconceptions about Judaism. Hebrew School destroys our Judaism, we don’t like our Judaism. So Meor comes to college to try to present a Judaism that’s cool, that’s relatable, and [that] breaks misconceptions. Judaism is not about the *shul*, it’s about family. People think you can’t have a conversation with an Orthodox Jew, or that Judaism is sexist, or that you can’t have a career and be a Jew--that Judaism has to come second to those things.”

“The most important thing,” Rabbi Fleshel finishes, “is being true to myself. In other words, the reason I do this job is because I feel it’s my purpose to share Judaism with people and

I have to be an example. I also feel that at the end of the day I just have to be focused on what my job is and who I am; my job is who I am. It's not about the statistics and results, who becomes *frum* and who becomes *shomer shabbos*. It's about me being there for people who want to grow. When I'm true to myself, it doesn't matter if people aren't committing to Maimonides, even if they signed a piece of paper, or if they don't come to my house for Shabbos, or say inappropriate things to me. It's about learning not to take it personally." Emory Meor's mission, stated by their website and by the Fleshels, is to impart Jewish identity to Emory students. Thus, Meor is the only manifestation of contemporary campus *kiruv* at Emory.

### **Emory Jewish Life: Outreach vs Kiruv**

In this chapter, I described the events and circumstances of post-war America that caused Atlanta to become known as a *kiruv* city. I also provided a brief account of the development of Jewish life at Emory and an overview of the history and goals of Hillel, Chabad, and Meor--the three formally recognized Jewish campus groups, established at Emory as satellites of their national organizations.

The goals of Hillel and Chabad do not specify the outcomes they desire, but rather their contribution to the variety of needs of Emory's Jewish community; conversely, Meor's campus activities are solidly grounded in educational initiatives that teach their notion of Judaism to participants. While Hillel and Chabad represent the traditional "outreach" paradigm, which emphasizes providing opportunities for positive Jewish experiences, Meor's goals are firmly grounded in the innovative campus *kiruv* model Feldman describes in *Klal Perspectives*. In the next chapter, I will describe the programs offered by each organization, and the ways that each

group measures “success” to further illustrate the divergences between the activities of the “outreach” groups and those of the new *kiruv* organization.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **PROGRAMS OFFERED & MEASURES OF SUCCESS**

#### **Hillel Programming at Emory**

Hillel is “student-run,” meaning students hold many types of leadership positions and assist the staff appointed by Hillel’s central organization. The Hillel Student Board, led by a Student President, is elected by the Emory Jewish student community each spring and holds a one-year term. The President and immediate past-president appoint officers to the Board, and Board Members hold positions for President, Vice President, Freshman Engagement, Finance, Chief of Staff, Communications, Religious Life, and Programming. By allowing students to control important facets of leadership at Hillel, Hillel maintains consistent student involvement with their organization.

The Emory Hillel hosts several student groups, including: Chai Tunes, the Jewish a cappella group; Challah for Hunger, where students sell Challah that they bake and donate their profits to charities; the Chevrutah, where students engage in Jewish learning and discussion in pairs; Emory Students for Israel, which educates students about Israel’s contributions to the world; the JBiz Roundtable, where business students can network with Jewish entrepreneurs and corporate executives; JHealth Leadership Institute, which trains pre-medicine and public health undergraduates; AIDS Quilt on the Quad, an annual commemoration of World Aids Day; and Students Helping Organize Awareness of the Holocaust, a group that organizes programs and trips to educate students about the Holocaust and mass persecution. Together, the staff and student groups at Hillel foster a diverse Jewish community at Emory University where students of all Jewish denominations are welcome.

Hillel aims to meet the changing needs of students, beginning with Emory freshmen. Hillel appoints a Freshman Orientation Chairperson who welcomes incoming students and informs them of events on campus hosted by Hillel during the first weeks of school. These include a Move-in Shabbat dinner, a bagel brunch, a dinner and services for the First Shabbat, a Welcome Back Barbecue, a white water rafting trip with University of Georgia and Georgia Tech Hillel students, High Holiday services, a Braves game, among other activities. Interested freshmen are invited to participate in the First Year Students of Hillel (FYSH) program, where the Hillel staff pairs each freshman with an upperclassman who are called “big FYSH.” Before classes begin at Emory, Jewish freshmen who reach out to Hillel are offered a variety of social, religious, and community service programs that both help them become acclimated to Jewish life at Emory and facilitate their involvement with Emory Hillel.

Each week Hillel offers student-led Friday night services for Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox students. Every other week, Hillel hosts free Shabbat dinners, to which it frequently invites speakers from the community. Students who elect to celebrate Shabbat outside of the Hillel building are able to participate in Hillel’s “Shabbat-to-Go” program, where aspiring Shabbat hosts are granted a food subsidy and ritual items such as challah, grape juice, *yarmulkes*, and candles, so that they can celebrate Shabbat wherever they choose, with help from Hillel. During the High Holidays Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Hillel invites students to attend services and dinners for Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox students, sponsored by Hillels of Georgia. Students can call staff members at Hillel for advice and support if professors schedule academic responsibilities that conflict with observance of these holidays. During Passover each spring, students can either attend a seder at the Hillel building or apply for a Seder-to-Go grant,

which will allow students to host their own seder and receive either \$5 for each student who attends or a reimbursement for the total cost of their receipts.

Hillel facilitates Emory students' travel to Israel in many ways. The Hillel Israel committee was established to promote Israel advocacy, and members organize guest lectures from journalists, policy makers, and musicians for the community. Emory Hillel also sends students to intern with MASA, an organization that places students in jobs, study abroad programs, and post-college careers. Students who have never journeyed to Israel can apply to Birthright Israel through Hillel at Emory, and they can travel for free with other Jewish students from their community who apply to Birthright through Hillels of Georgia. "Hillels of Georgia takes 120 students each year on our Birthright trips, and about 80 are from Emory," Rabbi Shulkes tells me during our interview.

### **Emory Hillel: Measuring Success**

"I have expectations of my staff," says Rabbi Shulkes, "that they're meeting students and impacting lives." Rabbi Shulkes prioritizes Hillel's ability to impact students, but does not mention any official guidelines that evaluate Hillel's impact. In fact, Rabbi Shulkes expresses no palpable concern with whether or not he is successful, and changes the subject almost immediately. Rabbi Shulkes' statement demonstrates that Hillel embodies the "outreach" approach because he is solely focused on Hillel's contribution to Jewish life at Emory rather than on the religious identities of his students.

## Chabad Programming at Emory

“I’m not a psychologist, but the thing we do most often is one-on-one learning with students, and many times the students need counseling,” says Miriam Lipskier, although she does not say the exact number of students she meets. She generally meets primarily with female students, and her methods vary: she “grabs coffee” weekly with some students, and others come to the Chabad House for a talking session with one of the Lipskiers. Sometimes the students initiate a meeting for one-on-one Jewish learning, and others seek out Miriam for advice with personal issues. “I have some girls telling me about their roommate problems, the stress from their school work, their love lives, and I know that they just want me to listen to them,” Miriam explains. “Sometimes I just want to say, ‘Come on! These are small things, why are you worrying about them? But that’s not why they came to me, they want me to give them advice, and they trust me.’” Miriam thinks the students trust her advice because many are far from their families, and they see Miriam as a Jewish Mother who can give the kind of support that they crave from their own families.

Zalman offers one-on-one “learning” sessions that are characteristic of Orthodox Judaism: traditionally, Orthodox Jewish students seek a *chavrutah*, or “learning partner,” a rabbi who can provide personalized pedagogy that is based on specific issues a student wants to focus on in the Torah and the Talmud. Typically, only male students sign up for these one-on-ones with Rabbi Lipskier, although women are not explicitly forbidden from scheduling sessions with the Rabbi. Some students learn every week at the same time, and others make occasional

appointments. Miriam and Zalman's goal for these intimate sessions is to create an environment that is "somewhere students feel comfortable coming," according to Miriam.

Miriam says that every Jewish student naturally wonders, "What does Shabbat dinner look like?" Chabad is the only organization that hosts Shabbat dinner every week, and Miriam prepares all of the food in the Chabad House. "Thursday nights, this isn't an official 'program,' but every week a couple of girls come over to help me cook for Shabbos," Miriam says. "I stand at the sink and I peel vegetables, and sometimes a girl will help me peel, and other times a girl will just stand next to me and talk about the things on her mind." Miriam bakes challah for at least 30 guests, in addition to her family, and prepares a free four-course meal for students.

Parents, students, and staff are invited to Shabbat every Friday night either through word-of-mouth or through the Lipskiers' Facebook invitation to "Friday Night Live." Students can RSVP through the Emory Chabad website, but most frequently they RSVP by selecting the "attend" button on the Friday Night Live Facebook event page. Shabbat is held outside the Lipskiers house during all seasons of the year on a patio that is covered by a white tarp. During the winter, there are heaters inside the tent. There are usually about four long tables that are fit into this tent during Shabbat, with the Lipskiers and their six children at the table that is in the front of the patio. In the back of the modified patio the Lipskiers put a cooler of chilled wine and seltzer, and every table is given a bottle of wine because Orthodox Jews believe that consuming alcohol on Shabbat is beneficial for fulfilling the commandment to observe the holiday.

Miriam and Zalman conduct separate events called "Lunch-N-learns," which all students are invited to attend either through word-of-mouth or through a Facebook event. When I sat in on one of these luncheons, it was the week of Purim, and there were five other women seated at

the table. When I walked in several minutes late, everyone had already served themselves food and Miriam was in the middle of her lesson, but she paused to greet me, shouting, “Go get some chicken soup, please! It’s so delicious and I want you to have it!” While we ate, Miriam spoke for one hour about a range of topics relating to the meaning of Purim, and afterward she asked if any of us wanted to contribute a story that exemplified the lessons taught during the holiday. Four out of five women at the table, including myself, shared stories about problems balancing school work and social lives, problems with roommates, and other matters.

Each Wednesday, the Lipskiers hold a kosher barbecue called “Chillin’ and Grillin’” on their Facebook event page. “We’ve done the weekly barbecue, followed by a Torah class, for 10 years now,” Miriam says. At about 5:45 each Wednesday, the Lipskiers announce on the Facebook page, they offer “Gourmet kosher Protein, grilled to perfection by Rabbi Z.” Every week they plan a different topic to discuss, and during Jewish festivals like the High Holidays, Sukkot, Chanukkah, Purim, and Passover the discussion is inspired by the theme of the Holiday.

Beginning about four years ago, the Chabad at Emory received a grant from the Rohr Jewish Learning Institute to fund a program called “Sinai Scholars,” an eight-week course: each week, Rabbi Lipskier focuses on a specific commandment out of the Ten commandments that Orthodox Jews believe were handed to them at Mount Sinai. The grant makes it possible for approximately 15 students to complete the program and receive a \$350.00 scholarship upon completion. For two hours each Monday night, participants can study the workbooks provided by Chabad while Rabbi Lipskier teaches about the syllabus assigned by the Sinai Scholars foundation. Students must complete two “fieldtrips,” which are usually overnight Shabbats called *Shabbatons*, in addition to the 10-week course.

## Measuring Success

Chabad at Emory is a subsidiary of a national organization that has been the icon of Jewish “outreach” since it began to establish Chabad Houses in the 20th century. David Eliezrie, a *shliach* who contributed to *Klal Conversations* (2013) articulates Chabad’s perception of “success” in his article “The Unique Model and Success of Chabad”:

“How does Chabad define success? Is it the transformation of a Jew from a secular lifestyle to one that is fully observant? Or is it the beginning of a trek from a life orientation devoid of Torah to one that attempts to integrate elements of Yiddishkeit into one’s life? Or is it the performance of one mitzvah on a street-corner in Manhattan? To me, it’s clear that the ultimate goal is the former. But it is equally clear to me that success is any of these” (Eliezrie).

When I ask Miriam how she evaluates Chabad’s achievements, she says, “Some programs have specific measures of what equals success. We don’t have quotas”--but she remembers someone from a different Jewish organization that she does not name who did keep quotas--“and we don’t keep track of numbers of students who are celebrating Shabbat or keeping kosher.” The Lipskiers consider “any increase or upgrade in Jewish life” to be a marker of their success. “An upgrade means that more Jewish things are going on, on campus. We are happiest when there is a lot going on at all three Jewish groups on any given day.” The programs that the Lipskiers organize are meant to show students of all backgrounds a model of a Jewish lifestyle, and they feel this is especially important for “nonobservant kids who want to revisit Judaism.” The most important outcome for Miriam is the turn-out to the events, rather than the behaviors students may choose to alter as a result of their programs. “There is no agenda that people need to be doing, behaving, or observing Judaism in a specific way to determine if a program is successful,” Miriam adds. If students are showing up to Chabad activities to meet their Jewish needs, whatever they may be, the Lipskiers are satisfied.

Like Hillel, Chabad's position regarding measuring success is less pronounced than their desire to be valuable resources for Jewish students. Thus, Chabad, which was the icon of the traditional model of campus *kiruv*, currently represents the new model of campus "outreach."

### **Meor Programming at Emory**

Meor provides several services to college students of all Jewish backgrounds through their national organization and funding. They host the Maimonides Leaders Fellowship that provides about three hours of Jewish learning per week for one college semester; each session involves a class about Judaism with the Meor campus rabbi and a guest speaker. In addition, students are required to attend at least two overnight Shabbat experiences (known as *Shabbatons*) in the Jewish community of Beth Jacob and Toco Hills. Students are required to keep a journal of their reflections, questions, and concerns during the experience, and at the end of the program students are eligible for a trip to Israel subsidized by the Meor program. Upon successfully completing the Maimonides Fellowship, students are awarded a \$300 stipend; however, for each missed event students are penalized by a 10% deduction from this amount. The topics of recent Meor classes cover a wide range, with the topics listed on their 2012 annual report including : "How to Become a Grateful Person," "Science and Torah," "Destiny or Decision: Discovering Our Individual Purpose," and "Applying Jewish Ethics to 21st Century Dilemmas," among many others. The guest speakers hired by the national organization have included Judge Dan Butler of the Municipal Court of Pittsburgh, Aliza Blum of "Larry King Live," Goldman Sachs Hedge Fund Manager Ranaan Agus, and Disney animator, director and producer Saul Blinkoff, among many other notable names.



Upon graduating from the Maimonides Fellowship, students have the option of participating in the Maimonides Leadership Fellowship II, “the in-depth sequel” (“Maimonides II”). Students who want to learn at a higher level than the classes offered from the first program are invited to complete a more flexible program that focuses on any questions or interests the student might have. This more individualized approach is facilitated by classes, speakers, discussions, one-on-one learning, *Shabbatons*, and field trips. Graduates are eligible for a free round-trip plane ticket to Israel for any approved three-week learning program, and some are eligible to receive a \$250 stipend.

The Israel trips for which Maimonides I and II graduates qualify are offered during both winter and summer college breaks. On these trips, between three and four hours of most mornings are devoted to formal Jewish learning in a seminary setting for women and a *yeshivah* setting for men; the consequence of this arrangement will be examined in the following chapter. During the afternoons, the Meor staff organizes tours throughout the country, and students are given free time most nights with no curfew imposed. Each weekend, Meor arranges for students to celebrate Shabbat with different Jewish communities, and students are provided with housing arrangements at the dwellings of Meor lay leaders who reside in Israel.

For students who have participated in either Maimonides or the Meor Israel programs, Meor offers the Meor Vision program. Those who have completed Maimonides II are only responsible for paying \$450 for this trip, and travel is free; students who have not graduated from Maimonides II are responsible for \$450 and for transportation to and from Israel, although they receive a \$750 stipend for travel. Meor Vision was implemented in 2012 due to demand for a “next step” in Jewish learning among students who had completed other Meor learning

programs. This three-week trip combines Torah study, Jewish education, and leadership training with a learning component in which students choose a Jewish topic to develop into a project and present to friends and family in America.

Meor targets college-aged students and recognizes that “most college and graduate students feel a ton of pressure to stay career-focused throughout the year, and spend their summers in professional settings so as to add experience to their resumes” (“Meor JInternship”). Students accepted into Meor’s JInternship program are given a stipend of \$1500 that can be spent on six weeks of Jewish learning and internship experience in Jerusalem. Meor also offers a second internship program called Meor on the Hill, which matches students with members of Congress during the summer for an unpaid internship in Washington, DC. Students who participate in Meor on the Hill are invited to attend Sinai Retreats at the end of their internships.

In addition to the array of programs that Meor offers college students outside of campus, they maintain a consistent presence in campus life. The Meor campus rabbi is available upon request for one-on-one learning with any student. Each week Meor rabbis host Shabbat dinners at their homes, where students are able to observe the “basics” of Shabbat: lighting Shabbat candles, making *kiddush* by saying a Hebrew blessing over wine, washing their hands before eating, and blessing the *challah*. Meor also offers special women’s programs where female students are able to “ask questions about gender roles, relationships, balancing work and family life, cherished Jewish traditions, women’s leadership and more in a comfortable and supportive environment that is responsive to their sensitivities and concerns” (“Emory Meor Women’s Programming”). Among the programs available to these students are challah baking, sorority discussion groups, yoga classes, and an alternate spring break trip.

## Measuring Success:

“How do I measure success?” Rabbi Fleshel responds to my question by comparing Meor to the other campus groups. “For Hillel, it’s how many kids are participating in the programming. For Chabad, it’s how many people are coming to Shabbat. For me, it’s who is learning Torah.” He adds, “If one-third of the people from Maimonides go on our Israel trip, that is a success.” “What is important is that people are growing from Judaism and learning about it.”

Before and after each Maimonides session, Rabbi Fleshel says he distributes a survey, but he does not specify all of the questions. Of 23 men enrolled in the spring 2013 program, “how many of those said they were going to marry non-Jewish or Jewish? 15 out of 23 are not concerned with marrying Jewish, and eight said he would marry Jewish, while five out of those eight students said that if they fell in love with a non-Jew, they would marry them. Only one out of 23 students said he would not date a non-Jew. Statistics say that if someone marries a non-Jew, he or she is likely to raise his or her children non-Jewish. In America, the number of Jews is going down, but there are more Orthodox Jews because the other [sects] intermarry” and do not raise their children with Jewish tradition. “I don’t focus on intermarriage,” Rabbi Fleshel adds. “It’s more about the education. Each person is individually different.”

After the Maimonides program, Rabbi Fleshel distributes a second survey as a requirement of the Wolfson-Horn mandate, which was set by two Orthodox philanthropists who fund Meor’s *kiruv* programs. Rabbi Fleshel says the survey asks “which programs you liked, how has your attitude toward Judaism changed, and whether you’re more likely to be involved. I don’t even think they look at it. I look at it to see so I can improve my program; you have to be

held accountable at any job. I don't concern myself with who is keeping *Shabbos*. The donors are putting in money, and they want to see how many people are affected. It's not what I care about. It's like a business. The donors want to know what I'm doing." Rabbi Fleshel also measures his success by how many relationships he has with Jewish students. "Do people say they're going to Meor for *Shabbos*, or that they're going to the Fleshels? Do people say they're going to the Lipskiers? It's about those kinds of relationships." When he evaluates results, Rabbi Fleshel says, "Normally fully kosher comes last because it is the hardest thing and because it's constant. Kosher means only kosher restaurants and food. Shabbat comes way before."

Meor's disproportionately large concern with measuring success, relative to Hillel and Chabad, conveys how dramatically contemporary campus *kiruv* departs from the campus "outreach" groups: measuring success is crucial for Rabbi Fleshel and for his boss, Rabbi Menachem Deutsch. In the article "A City of Hope in the State of Kiruv," Ari Koretzky emphasizes "the impact Rabbi Menachem Deutsch," founder of ASK and chairman of Meor, "has had over the past three years in standardizing and crystalizing goals, and in directing funding towards projects that most effectively promote them" (Koretzky). Because of Deutsch, Meor at Emory measures success by reporting to Meor National the number of people who have become more observant. "In running the Horn-Wolfson funded North American campus projects," says Avraham Edelstein in his article "The Global Teshuva Movement Continues," "Rabbi Menachem Deutsch established the annual goal per *mekarev* of seven new students either becoming frum or attending Yeshiva for six months or longer," says (Edelstein 5). In the following section, I include my interview with Rabbi Deutsch, the man behind these numbers.

## **Rabbi Menachem Deutsch**

When my PERI internship coordinator visited Emory in October 2012, she stayed with Menachem Deutsch. I picked her up from his house in Toco Hills, and when I told her about my fieldwork while standing in his foyer, he volunteered to schedule an interview. We met the following week in his house in Toco Hills, a neighborhood adjacent to Beth Jacob. At the beginning of our conversation he explains that about one year after founding ASK, the Kollel “started our outreach program at Emory.” The Kollel, he says, “is adult Jewish education. That is part of our mandate: anything from teens and up. We started the Jewish Educational Alliance (JEA)--I don’t even know if it exists anymore, it was a stupid organization--at Emory. That was our first, what you call “college outreach.” He explains, “I was running the Kollel here, so I went to the Wolfson Foundation for a project I wanted to start here. The response I got was, ‘That’s not really where our heart is. Our heart is young adult outreach, but would you take this job [with campus *kiruv*]? Would you be interested?’ Because I had a relationship with them for 20 years, our goals were very much in sync. When we started our college outreach program I went to the Wolfson Foundation and said, ‘Listen, do you believe in this? Would you help us?’ So they gave us SEED money to start off. [JEA] started with a ‘lunch and learn,’ then it grew over time, then we actually put one of our rabbis full-time into college outreach: Rabbi Golding. Basically,” he jokes, “while I was there, innocently recruiting for the Kollel, I got recruited”--into campus *kiruv*.

Deutsch explains that after JEA was founded, “Rabbi Golding’s family got older and it was hard to do it. They weren’t as portable. You know, it happens, it takes its toll on the family.

[At] college, Shabbat's very intense and kids come over all day and all night. So as his kids were growing up it became harder for them to do it so they were kind of--phasing out. And Meor, that was around the time Meor[...]had a couple of campuses that *they* wanted to, to work on. So the two things coincided, so that worked out perfectly."

When Rabbi Golding left, "Rabbi Fleshel came with Meor," Rabbi Deutsch explains. When I inquire about the selection process Meor used to select Rabbi Fleshel, Deutsch says, "This was his third position in Jewish outreach. He had a good reputation, a good track record, it was easy." I ask him to explain what he means by "track record." "In other words, he'd been to two different campuses before, and everywhere he went he was inspiring students to go to Israel trips." Rabbi Fleshel is "not a flashy guy, quite the opposite of a salesman," Deutsch adds, his fondness for "marketing" Judaism audible in his tone. "Not the sales personality you normally envision. When I met him I was like, 'How's he going to relate to the students? He's so quiet.' But he knows how to give the students just enough, and inspire them enough to want to do it themselves, and that's what the job is. He doesn't push. He pulls, which is what the job is."

Rabbi Deutsch was a principal figure during Meor's gestation. "I run the Kollel, so we were in a partnership. Meor is still in partnership with the Atlanta Scholars Kollel. Rabbi Yaakov studies with the Kollel every morning. I don't know if you knew that," He adds. I told him that until that point I was not sure what Rabbi Fleshel does when he is not on campus. "Yeah, he's studying himself, as part of the ground rules of the Kollel. You gotta be learning yourself if you wanna teach. That's one of the more unique points of I think, Meor in general, in that way. You can't be a Meor rabbi," he says, indicating the competence required for the position, "if you're not studying yourself. A minimum of an hour and a half of studying," he

concludes, revealing his affinity for using specific measurements in his organization. Meor rabbis generally complete a rabbinical learning program “that trains folks like Rabbi Yaakov-- although I don’t know if he went to it--in Israel and in New Jersey; they have two,” according to Deutsch. “So it’s a program that helps with training, so they’ve got people follow up with their alumni.”

Deutsch describes his position in the Kollel as “a deposed monarch. I used to be the director of the Kollel, and I stepped down two years ago” to take a position with the Wolfson-Horn Foundation. “Zev Wolfson started it. He went into partnership with a guy in Brazil, and they fund [Meor]. Meor, Ohr Sameach, Aish HaTorah, it’s a whole host of organizations that they fund to do Jewish outreach.” I ask who the partner from Brazil is, and he says, “You’ve never heard of this guy: Horn. They started a partnership with one program 14 years ago, and then they just found more and more things they wanted to partner in. All Jewish outreach. So I basically work with Meor, work with Aish [Hatorah], work with these other organizations. For the Foundation, I try to manage money. I try to make sure their objectives are being met by the people they’re giving money to. So I go and visit the programs, see what they’re doing, how they’re doing it, what’s working, what’s not working, what should we be investing more in, new things we should try.”

When I question Rabbi Deutsch about his objectives and the way they are implemented, he laughs and says, “so this is where we’re into the meat of your thesis, right? Let’s do why and then what, OK? Start with the why. I was, I guess[...]a *yeshivah* student generally studying in high school, studying Judaics in the morning, studying general studies in the afternoons, and back to Judaics in the evening. It’s a full seven in the morning until 10 at night. That’s the

normal schedule.” Rabbi Deutsch was studying at a *yeshivah* in Denver. “I grew up in Dallas, but Denver was the closest boarding school, or high school.” He was raised in a Modern Orthodox family, “you might call it. But,” according to Deutsch, “Dallas didn’t have much in terms of Orthodox. There was precious little.” I interrupt, “Doesn’t Dallas have one of the largest synagogues in America?” “Not Orthodox,” he responds. In fact, Temple Emanu-El of Dallas, a Reform synagogue, is the largest in the South. “There was an Orthodox *in name* synagogue, but it didn’t have the *mechitzah*, which is the divider between men and women,” he adds. “So *technically* speaking, it was *labelled* ‘Orthodox,’ but in *reality*, it wasn’t an Orthodox synagogue. It wasn’t *halachic*. And they didn’t keep all the rules.” Deutsch says the lack of Orthodoxy is a symptom of the South. “None of the kids, none of my friends, none of them had observant homes. I mean, out of our whole class, *two* wouldn’t drive on Shabbos,” he laments. Rabbi Deutsch’s conception of authentic Judaism has specific parameters that cannot be crossed; his standards of observance are so high that he traveled to Denver in order to find the closest Orthodox school.

In high school, his plan “was to go to the computers. This goes back to the mid-70s, that was the up-and-coming field. And I thought that was my plan. It’s...pretty customary that you take a year off, a gap year after high school, to study full time Judaics. So that was a normal thing to do, not everyone did, but I did. And by the end of that year, I said, ‘This is what I want to do the rest of my life. I wanna study and teach Judaics the rest of my life.’ So what happened that year? Pretty much as I became more observant myself, I realized how enriching it was to my own life, I wanted to share it. It’s like if you see a good story and want to share it with a friend,



you see a good joke, you wanna call home and tell your--you know, if it's something meaningful to you, you want to share." "That's a good metaphor," I tell him.

Deutsch continues, "And, that's what I wanted to do. It just became a very, very meaningful thing for myself personally, and so one year out of high school, I decided this is what I want to do. If you pull people, I think you'll find that's what it is...[Judaism is] what animates life, you give life meaning. So you wanna share it with people, so you wanna share it with other Jews. And it proved--I think if you pull folks like me, everyone had that point. You know that Rabbi Yaakov [Fleshel] himself became more observant. He didn't grow up observant at all. I did. I grew up keeping Shabbos, but it wasn't that central a part of my life. That," he says, "is the *why*," the reason for the measurements of "progress" in campus *kiruv*.

Rabbi Deutsch continues to structure the conversation by first identifying the main point he will speak about, and acknowledging when it has been communicated. "So if you ask *what* and *how*, it's pretty much that I just want to give other people the opportunity to study and make the decisions I made. In other words, it's no accident that Jewish continuity and Jewish commitment is very highly correlated to Jewish knowledge. Very highly correlated. In other words, the more education the student--kids who went to Jewish day schools, by a long shot are more likely to marry Jewish, to have Jewish children, and to observe Jewish festivals, to affiliate with synagogues, affiliate with the JCC, give to the Federation. *All* of the metrics [show] there's a very high level of correlation between the two: the more educated they are, if they're educated through high school, then you've got a really good shot that you're gonna have Jewish children and Jewish grandchildren--Jewish children and *maybe* Jewish grandchildren," he corrects himself. His words hold profound meaning: "Jewish commitment" is used interchangeably with

“intermarriage.” Rabbi Deutsch’s focus on numerical corroboration is unceasing as he continues, “You have a really high shot there. If they opt out along the way, then they can just--that’s a very strong correlation between the two. More than the camps, more than the Israel experiences. That’s the highest.” I ask him how the correlation is measured, and he says, “Every single study will tell you the same thing. I think you’ll find it, without exception.”

Rabbi Deutsch says his objective “is that people should become informed and make informed choices. So, you know what I’m trying to do is--what I’m hoping is--every kid, including yourself, everyone who goes through Meor will opt to take time out, go to Israel, study themselves, and make an informed choice. You know, obviously I would love to see everyone make my choice, but not everyone’s gonna do that; not everyone wants to do that, that’s their prerogative. We want to avoid very much being, pushy, cultish, mind-control, that kind of stuff. That’s not good, that’s not healthy for anybody, either for the student or for us. But education is healthy, and that’s what’s missing. That’s what’s missing,” he repeats. “You’ll see that the ones who have no legitimate background are most likely to intermarry than the ones who have, lets say, Hebrew school twice a week. You probably did that, right?” He asks. “I did do that.” “Once a week?” I respond, “Twice a week, and I taught Hebrew school twice.” “Twice a week!” he says. “So that’s a higher correlation. As it goes, the more educated, the more *likely* it is that they’re going to find something that’s meaningful for them. The people who just go to synagogue twice a year--” With this reference to Jews who only attend synagogue during the High Holidays, Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur, our conversation is interrupted by a flower delivery from my PERI internship coordinator, her thank-you gift to Rabbi Deutsch for giving her accommodations during her stay in Atlanta the previous week.

When the delivery man leaves, Deutsch resumes talking. “So we’re trying to inspire people to [think], ‘There’s enough in this, it could be meaningful enough to my life, to my future, the things that I care about, I wanna take time to really understand it.’ Right?” Israel, says Deutsch is “the easiest place to take off and go [to], because there aren’t that many schools here. There are one or two, but not that many where you can just take off time if you don’t have a lot of background in Hebrew and stuff like that, and get the education. That’s really what we would consider to be scoring. And there’s a lot of things on the way which are really nice. People who decide they want to marry Jewish, that’s really nice. Who wanna take on Kosher, or Shabbat, or whatever it is, all of that is very nice. These are really good things. Our main objective is, ‘Take off time to study.’ That’s what we hope people will decide to do.”

Students’ decisions to study is “their choice. But we feel that we’ve accomplished what we want to do if they make the choice that they want to study, that they want to learn. Whatever they decide to do, they decide to do. But, it doesn’t have to be a year or two; everyone is different. I’d say a minimum of three months to really get enough information,” he says, reverting to his numerical fascination. “You can’t make up 18--or 22--years [without Jewish learning] in a month, but after 3 months a person gets a feel for, ‘Is it something I wanna pursue some more? Is it something I don’t want to pursue some more?’” He continues, “The Meor program is *very* Maimonides-driven. Maimonides is great, because you’ve got this little hook. It brings money,” he laughs. “It brings people in. The stipend is not--I’ve been to enough Maimonides graduations, that I know the students will say, ‘We really enjoyed the program, we really loved ‘*shah*-bad’--he jokingly imitates the students pronouncing Chabad incorrectly--“that’s usually what they say. ‘If not for the money we never would have done it,

but now we've done it, we're happy that we did it, even without the money.' That's usually what's happening. Without the money, they don't even think about it. So the hook, it gets them in, and then you've got people putting 50 hours into classes and journals and Shabbatons. You put 50 hours in, and that's enough to give a person a taste to see if they want more."

He tells me that this results-driven approach is expensive but worthwhile for its return. "I agree, it's a lot of money," Deutsch says of the \$300 stipends and subsidized Israel trips. "Let's call it 'expensive recruitment,' on the one hand. On the other hand, it's working. Because we have questionnaires at the end and evaluations at the end of Maimonides, and consistently, I'd say two out of three really felt that it was a mind-opening or life-altering experience. So is it the most cost effective? I don't know, you'll have to answer that question. Do I have reservations about it? Yeah. Does it work? For our objectives, does it work? Yes."

Rabbi Deutsch says that Messianism may be one motivation of the donors, though it is not primary. "Every *mitzvah* we do hastens the coming of the Messiah. Everything good we do. We're not Messiah-driven--Chabad might be more Messiah-driven--we're not. We're 'doing-the-right-thinGodriven.'" Says Deutsch, "If you ask me, I do believe that what we're experiencing in today's day and age--people who don't have religious backgrounds who are 'opting in'--is a phenomenon which is almost unprecedented in Jewish history *and* is one of the signs of the Messianic age. That's written down, that that's one of the signs of the Messianic age. Its actually the second to the last verse in Prophets. Are you interested in seeing it? I'll show it to you." Rabbi Deutsch's family is respected in the community for their incredible mastery of Jewish text. He retrieves a book from the shelf behind us, and points to the passage. "It only started 50 years go, in the beginning of the '70s, end of the '60s. But we're not

Messiah-driven. What drives us is to do God's will, do the right thing, that's what drives us. But if you ask me, I have to believe just on what I'm seeing: Jewish people coming back to Israel, that's remarkably an understatement. I mean, who would have thought, 100 years ago? Impossible to even have imagined it." Although he vehemently denies that Meor is driven by Messianism, Deutsch's words indicate that *he* may find credibility in Messianic predictions.

"You see that happening right in front of you, the land is coming back to life[...]You see all this happening in front of us, the *teshuvah* phenomenon, which I don't know if it ever happened in Jewish history. It was almost unheard of in the '50s and '60s. It wasn't a phenomenon, wasn't a movement of any sort. You had individuals, here and there, but then all of a sudden you have *yeshivahs* and seminaries, and a catering to the seminaries, people who are coming from all over the world, for a second shot at studying, which all started in the '70s." He says that the BT movement's growing momentum coincided with similar movements in Israel and Russia. "All three places it happened, around the same time. So in Russia they said it's because of the oppression, in Israel they said it's because of the Six Day War, over here they say it's because of the '60s and moral bankruptcy. So there were different reasons but it was all happening at the same time all around the world[...]There's something else going on, that's the conclusion I would draw."

We begin to talk about the motives of the Foundation that funds Meor. "[The Donors] want to give people a chance. To us it's tragic that most of the Jewish people don't even know what they're walking away from. They're walking away. Six out of 10 intermarry. They don't know what they're walking away from, and it's the most meaningful and beautiful thing. It's

lasted--it's been around for thousands of years, and it's the best product in the world, and people are just walking away from it. That's what drives all of us, more than anything."

Despite the donors' concern with preserving their thousand-year-old "product," Deutsch says, "We're not worried about the continuation of Judaism. In the Federation, when the 1990 population study came out, which basically showed that we were going in the wrong direction, we had all kinds of Jewish continuity, an urgent call [to action], et cetera. From an Orthodox perspective, we're not worried about Jewish continuity. We've been around for 3300 years, and we'll be around for the end of time. That's promised in the book, and these promises all come true, so I'm not worried about that." If his remarks about intermarriage are not based on Jewish survivalism, then perhaps intermarriage is important for the same reason that all other "successes" are important: because they maximize the numbers.

He continues, "But you can't say, if you're on the battle field, and you're winning the war, and your comrade just got shot, 'No problems, we're gonna win the war, you can leave the dead on the field.' You can't do that. It's a brother. So if we're family, which we are, we can't just turn our backs and watch all these Jews just jump off the cliff, so to speak, spiritually, and sell away their Judaism, and not care. So it's not a continuity issue. If you go to the Federation and ask why they reallocated money to Jewish education, which they didn't used to do 20 or 30 years ago, they'll tell you it's because of Jewish continuity. Because they're worried about Jewish continuity. I'm not, donors are not...I mean, I hate to say this, but look at the Orthodox birth rate. Thank God. It's a small percentage of the Jewish community, but if you look at any demographic study, two generations from now, at the rate things are going, it's going to be a dominant--in Israel, it's already changing the whole demographics. Because whatever the

reasons are, the more observant they are, the more children they are having, so that's not it...We care about our fellow Jews."

When Deutsch assesses the Meor programs that are implemented on 75 college campuses, he says, "We're meeting and touching and inspiring a lot of kids, but we're not giving enough opportunity for them to follow up, enough man power to follow up. Students want to study one-on-one, that's something we need to focus more on. In other words, you do Maimonides. Maimonides is great. Then what? So now you got a kid who says, 'You know something? I liked what I saw, this might have meaning in my life. Now what?' So Maimonides II is an outgrowth of that. We are *re*-focusing on providing more tools for people to take the next step...If they want." Maimonides II, the Israel trips, and PERI "are attempts to give students more opportunities."

The most recent program added to the Meor curriculum is Meor Vision, the most advanced program for students who have done Maimonides I and II and at least one Meor Israel trip. "Say I can't take three months off, but I can take three weeks off. Meor Vision gives that person a chance to really explore studying, instead of touring. That's where we focus, and we're doing a decent job of giving more tools. [Meor Vision] is very successful. It's growing. I mean, it's probably doubled since [it began last year]." In their respective first years at Emory, neither Hillel nor Chabad could boast the same success within the time frame. "We're giving students the opportunity to go do things they didn't think existed before. If they wanna study in Israel, three months or more, so we're offering--I assume you know this, by the way," he says. "We're offering subsidies for air fare and a monthly study if they need it. That's a need-based thing. 'I can't go because I have a car payment,' or 'My parents aren't going to give me a penny to

spend,' that kind of stuff, to make it easier for students to make those decisions. That [program is] also less than 2 years old." There is another knock at the door, and Rabbi Deutsch rushes to greet his neighbor, who is wearing a long skirt, long sleeves, and has a hair covering. He admires the baby on her hip while she asks him to take care of her mail during her vacation.

When she leaves, he discusses Meor's partnership with Birthright. "And then we've got Birthright folks also, we've got an office of people when Birthright runs a trip to Israel, so it's not really a-religious, but there's very little religious content in the Birthright trip. A lot of Jewish and Israel content, but not much religious content. So we provide a Shabbat experience, an Israel Shabbat experience. So a lot of the Birthright trips now will hook up with that office, and then Birthright students will have a chance to have a Shabbat." Diaspora Jewish college students who are on Birthright, Shaul Kelner discusses in *Tours That Bind*, are consumed by "The notion that diaspora Jewish homeland tours can and should be 'life changing,'" which Kelner claims "is both a prevalent expectation among its participants and one of the central justifications for the massive investment of diaspora philanthropic dollars and Israeli tax sheqels in the enterprise" (Kelner 188). Deutsch confirms Kelner's argument as he discusses the ways Meor intercepts Birthright participants with the hope that one Shabbat dinner will change their lives.

"In other words, we want to inspire people to want to do it because most kids who come to campus, they want to have fun, they want to get a good education, but they don't necessarily want to find out about their Jewish heritage, that's not why they're [in college]. It's not on most kids' radar screen. So we [have] got [to do] more than just provide and facilitate the learning, we've got also to inspire people to want it. Create the need, as far as the marketplace goes," he



says, alluding to the business tactics of Meor yet again. “Facilitate it, give them the tools. If they want more, it’s not easy to get it. If you’re really phanatically driven, you go on the web, listen to classes; most kids are not going to do that, it’s too hard. They’re good people, they’re just not motivated. We want to make it easy for them.” At that moment, Deutsch’s daughter pulls into the driveway on her motorcycle, wearing a helmet and a long skirt.

When he finishes greeting his daughter, I ask Deutsch how he chooses the content for the educational programs. “If you’re a beginner, why don’t you start with ‘In the beginning?’” I ask him, referencing the first sentence of the Torah. “I can venture a guess but I don’t know the answer,” he tells me. “One of the things that makes Judaism different--than, let’s say, Christianity--is that we believe that if a person *does* things, that affects their character and that affects their values, what they’re interested in. In other words, just give charity. Give, give, give; after a while, you’ll become charitable. You’re not going to be charitable, necessarily, when you start. *If* you do it, you’ll become charitable. Pray every day--pray, pray, pray--you’re not gonna understand what you’re doing. It’s not gonna mean so much to you, but after a while you’ll develop a relationship with God. [When] you do things, it impacts you. Certainly Shabbat seems like a bare--to someone who’s not doing it, someone who’s been doing it for a year [will] tell you, ‘I don’t know *how* I survived without it.’ You’ll ask people, that’s what they’ll tell you. Because it’s a mental respite, it’s just so therapeutic, right? Just do it. If you do it, do it, do it, all of a sudden you’ll be like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is amazing!’”

Deutsch continues to talk about Meor’s behavioral focus. “We tend to be ritual-focused, because it impacts us. We *do* it, then it starts *resonating*. You study about things, study about Kabbalah--Nice! What does it do for you as a person? Experience Shabbat, even if a person just

turns off their cell phone on Friday night, it impacts them. So that's my guess as to why." He says that the content of lessons organized by individual campus rabbis is chosen by the rabbis, and is not mandated by the National Meor body. "If I was [teaching] Maimonides and I only had 10 weeks to work with each student, what would be my ten topics?" He wonders aloud. "I'm *sure* shabbat would be one of them, Kosher, relationships for sure, Jewish history for sure, there's certain things for sure--that's a good question." When we conclude the interview, he invites me over for Shabbat dinner. "You open for invitations? Sometimes I know college students get hungry," he jokes.

### **Contemporary Campus Kiruv: Much Ado About Numbers**

Hillel, Chabad and Meor measure success in drastically different ways; however, it is clear that Hillel and Chabad's programming and metrics of success constitute them as "outreach" organizations. The bold strategy of Rabbi Menachem Deutsch was his invention of criteria through which students' "return" can be measured. Meor's focus on quantifying how "observant" their participants become after each program not only represents a bold strategy that focuses on numbers to quantify religiosity; this numbers-driven approach designates Meor as the sole *kiruv* organization at Emory.

My interview with Rabbi Deutsch illuminates the thinking of the man responsible for the remarkable innovation that has become the defining feature of *kiruv*: measuring success with numbers. Unlike previous *kiruv* models, Rabbi Deutsch indicates that preventing intermarriage is not a strategy for "Jewish continuity." Rather, it appears to that intermarriage is valuable because it multiplies Meor's impact on future generations of Jews; in fact, preventing intermarriage in one person drastically increases the return of Meor's investment in the student:

if each Meor recruit marries a Jew and has at least one child, and if that child maintains the tradition, the subsequent generation will triple Meor's quantified impact. The return for each student rises exponentially with each child born to a Jewish couple who are prevented from intermarrying by Meor. Now that Meor's *kiruv* strategy has been analyzed by the people who invent and implement the programming, it is necessary to understand how these strategies are applied. The following chapter is a compilation of three "portraits" of BTs who draw from their personal "journeys" of "return" to teach Emory Meor students how to follow the same path.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **THE PARADOX OF GENDERED & FEMINIST SCRIPTURALISM**

From the information and analysis in Chapter Two, it is clear that Meor represents the pioneering *kiruv* movement at Emory University, and that it operates through several types of educational seminars for college students. In this chapter I present three lessons about *tznius* (“modesty”) during which the Meor educators use story-telling to teach women about “modest” dress and comportment. Using personal stories to teach “modesty,” these teachers focus on showing their students what they *can* do in order to become religious, rather than telling women what they *should* do to “return.” Storytellers use both “gendered scripturalism,” which equates being Jewish with observing Meor’s interpretations of “modesty,” and “feminist scripturalism,” which conflates the choices women make about “modesty” with their potential empowerment, in order to inspire female students to dress and behave “modestly.”

In Meor’s seminary programs, women learn about Orthodoxy through “gendered scripturalism”: while men in *yeshivah* learn through critical analysis of the Talmud, the women in seminary are taught primarily “practical” classes “that touch directly on their daily lives as women, wives, and mothers” (El-Or 110). “Modesty” is the topic most frequently taught to women, and it is delivered through story-telling. Because of its exclusive focus on secular American universities, one of Meor’s biggest obstacles is catering its gendered-scripturalist curricula to secular women raised in post-feminist, American society.

Meor teachers successfully overcome this challenge by teaching *tznius* through “feminist scripturalism,” a strategy that frames lessons about women’s gendered behaviors in a way that

underscores the agency and autonomy of women who choose to be modest; the inclusion of this liberating rhetoric also involves omitting language in the Torah that may be perceived as demeaning toward women. Rabbi Fleshel articulates “feminist scripturalism” perfectly during our interview when he says, “In Judaism, men and women are different. That doesn’t mean they are not equal. We appreciate the differences between men and women. Feminism is women trying to be more like men. Hundreds of years ago, when women were persecuted and didn’t have equal rights, Judaism gave them rights.” He then suggests that I talk to another BT woman, saying only that “she used to be a feminist.” “Feminist scripturalism” frequently involves advocating for “modesty” and the behaviors associated with it--clothing, hair covering, *shomer negiyah*, singing in front of men--by directly contrasting them with what they claim are the secular alternatives: wearing clothes that devalue the body, promiscuity, and feelings of emptiness. The message is clear: the freedoms of American society enslave women, but Jewish gender laws can emancipate them.

Meor teaches only the more stringent interpretations of Talmudic gender laws to maximize their “authenticity,” and Meor educators’ lessons about *tznius* exemplify this approach: in Meor programs, “modesty” entails a mode of dress that covers a woman’s entire body, from collarbone to wrists and ankles; covering hair after marriage to hide sexual maturity; refraining from singing in front of men; *shomer negiyah* (“guarding touch”), meaning that women and men do not have physical contact before marriage, and spouses touch for the first time on their wedding day; and *yichud* (“together”), a rule that unmarried men and women not be in a room together with the door closed.

Rabbi Buchwald, formerly the head of the NJOP<sup>5</sup> criticizes “the recently growing influence of religiously extreme elements who are subtly radicalizing the kiruv culture”; Buchwald is concerned by *kiruv* groups who promote “the total elimination of the presence of women from all publicity in the name of *tznius*” and he contends that 30 years ago “no gadol [“sage”] suggested that women’s faces need, or even should, be blacked out” (Buchwald). The teaching of *tznius* through omissions of the diverse interpretations--which are present in the textual and interpretive tradition but are not taught to women--is a defining feature of Meor’s new educational model. While Buchwald warns that this can provide a dangerously narrowly-defined interpretation of “modesty” that deviates from the intentions of the Torah’s authors, many women are receptive to the feminist-scripturalist rhetoric used to teach about this concept.

### **Teaching *Tznius* Through Story-Telling**

What unites the gendered and feminist scripturalism present in formal classroom settings and the informal social settings is the use of personal story-telling, instead of textual reference, to modify women’s comportment. At Neve, the all-women’s seminary, we did not study the Jewish laws as they appear in texts; instead, the female lecturers would “inspire” us to change our behavior by telling stories about how they rejected secular--or less strict--alternatives to make the same change in their own lives. To inspire women to “take on” *tznius*, these story-tellers invoke “feminist scripturalism.”

Now that I have delineated the ways in which gendered and feminist scripturalism can be identified in pedagogical rhetoric, I provide three “portraits” of Meor female staff members, drawn from my own participation in Meor programming, who tell stories about adopting a *tznius*

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<sup>5</sup> National Jewish Outreach Program

lifestyle; as a female who is both a former Meor participant and a participant-observer, Meor's lesson format facilitated the most access to female educators. Every Meor teacher in this chapter--and in many classes at Neve--is a BT, and these fragments of their personal journeys focus on how the women adopted very restrictive dress and behavior in order to become more "Jewish." First I recount the story of a woman who hosted me for Shabbat when I was a freshman, told while her husband was praying at the *shul*; the second is the story from a class taught at Neve during my first and second Israel trips; the third is a Meor affiliate who conducts private group sessions with Meor women from Emory. These "portraits" of *tznius* story-telling illuminate the way Jewish authenticity and behavior are constructed by Meor educators, through which pedagogical strategies, and in what settings.

### **1. Shabbat Host**

It is Spring 2010, and I am in the kitchen of a young Baal Teshuvah couple, seated next to the high chairs of their two children as the hostess prepares our Shabbat lunch. Her husband had left the house earlier to daven at their synagogue, Beth Jacob in Toco Hills, Georgia. The woman tells my friend and I that she feels relieved that men and women have separate duties, because she would hate to daven at the *shul* so often. While we sat in her living room, my friend, who had been assigned to stay in the same Shabbaton house as me, asks her what exactly men and women do differently. The room is filled with shelves of books about Jewish law with shiny gold borders and dark brown leather covers. The woman motions to the books nonchalantly and says, "women's minds aren't interested in all that law stuff." She explains that the minds of men and women are different, and that they need different stimuli. I tell her I want to be a lawyer.

I ask my hostess how she had been able to transform her secular lifestyle into a strictly ordered society governed by a code of gender that had disintegrated in most modern countries by the middle of the 20th century. “I used to love basketball,” she responds. “The hardest part was that I didn’t think I could take on “modesty” because I wouldn’t be able to play basketball with my guy friends. I was the kind of girl with a lot of male friends. Then someone said, ‘is your whole life going to depend on a basketball game?’ And I realized that it wasn’t important to play basketball with the guys, because I can play at my all-women’s gym.”

## **2. Hailey\***

Hailey was hired to speak to my summer 2010 Meor class at Neve Seminary in Jerusalem about the challenges that she overcame by becoming an Orthodox Jew. Her personal narrative of “return” is typical of many that are told to potential BT students. Growing up in Australia, she had had a minimal affiliation with Judaism. She treasured her career in psychology, and she was hired to serve as the resident psychologist on a popular Australian television show. She had all that she thought she could want, but she was still unhappy, particularly with her relationships. When she sought psychological help, she recalls, one therapist recommended that she date more men to “experiment.” She was reeling from this advice when she became acquainted with an Orthodox rabbi from her community. This rabbi sent Hailey to Neve to learn more about Judaism, and Hailey thrived at the seminary.

When she returned to her home, she felt the beach beckoning to her, and she was tempted to lay in the sun in her favorite hot-pink bikini. She explains how much pleasure it gave her to wear that hot-pink bikini on the beach, and laments at how difficult it was to overcome the urge to violate Jewish modesty rules that she had been trying to observe. Finally, she remembers, she



succumbed to her desire, and after she returned from the beach in her pink bikini she called the rabbi with whom she had studied at Neve to seek advice about her transgression. After she finished confessing to the rabbi about her violation of “modesty” laws, she said the rabbi responded with only three words: “Jews don’t amputate.” What he meant, Hailey explained, is that Jews do not believe that one should take on too many responsibilities before they are ready. Hailey realized that she was not ready, at that point, to abandon her bikini, but in the future she hoped to be. From that point forward Hailey’s observance of Judaism grew in manageable increments, and as we can all see, she is dressed in fashionable but “modest” attire. When she finished her speech, my class at Neve applauded the Orthodox woman who was able to reach this level of religious satisfaction by increasing her observance in small steps.

### **3. Susan\***

In Spring 2012, a woman whom I had never met sent me a friend request on Facebook, we exchanged private messages, and then she invited me to her home. This situation is often the preface to a murder headline, but in this instance I survived to record my experience. Rabbi Fleshel had connected me with Susan, a local *baalat teshuvah* who lives in Toco Hills and teaches classes to small groups of female college students. I arrived at Susan’s apartment complex at 4:00 p.m. for our scheduled interview. Although she did not answer her cell phone, I was able to reach her husband, who cordially opened the gate and gave clear directions to their front door. Susan came to the door wearing a maternity shirt and a skirt that fell below her knees, and her head was adorned with a blue head scarf. She explained that her husband stayed home from work that day because their toddler had accidentally injured her husband’s eye. She offered to filter some water for me while I set up my tape recorder; while she waited for the

water to filter, Susan insisted that I sit in the most comfortable chair while she herself sat in a hard wooden seat next to me at their wooden dining room table. Scattered along the perimeter of the dining room were children's toys and bookshelves; the beige carpet led to a hallway through which Susan walked to check on her sleeping child. Her husband, Alex\*, emerged from this hallway wearing an eyepatch made of gauze, and before he could explain his condition she laughed and said, "I already told her." He disappeared into the adjacent kitchen which was within earshot of our interview session.

Susan was raised as a Christian in Boston, where she attended church weekly with her family and observed the holidays; at age 12, her mother revealed that Susan's great-grandmother had been Jewish. According to Susan, this revelation prompted her to peruse literature about her Jewish heritage through her middle school and high school years in order to learn about the concepts of Judaism that were, at that time, completely foreign to her. When she moved to New York for college, Susan frequently attended classes at a local *kiruv* center for people who had little experience with Judaism. These classes inspired her to tell her then-boyfriend, Alex, her intent to spend a year in Israel--after graduating one year early from NYU--at a seminary recommended by the kiruv organization. "I said, 'Join me or not, I need a year in Israel.' He was like, 'Absolutely, I'll do that.'"

As soon as the couple arrived in Israel, they agreed to begin observing the laws of *yichud*, which require that a man and a woman should not be alone in a room before marriage. They also decided to commit to the laws of *shomer negiah*, which forbid an unmarried couple to hold hands or to kiss before marriage. Susan and Alex acknowledge the difficulty of these new commitments, given the circumstances of their two-year relationship. They felt it was necessary

to begin observing these *mitzvot* because they would be living in the most religious neighborhood in Jerusalem, where such social standards are rigidly enforced by the community.

Both became very excited when they spoke of their first experience at the seminary, and they described how the rabbi not only accepted Susan, but also called his connections to find a program and lodging for Adam before he started at his yeshivah, Machon Yaakov, in the fall. With the help of the Orthodox community in Har Nof, Susan attended Machon Yaakov's corresponding seminary in the same religious neighborhood, Midreshet Rachel. It was at this point that the couple realized there are different expectations for students studying in the *yeshivah* than those learning in the seminary. Susan explains that at her all-women's school, "They push text study, skill building, and you learn *Halachah* from a Rabbi. You're not learning it from the Gemorrah, but you're *definitely* learning it in a challenging way."

Susan and her husband discuss the effect of learning at sex-segregated *yeshivot*. Alex explains that after three months in the *yeshivah*, without billboards that feature female images and with no women present other than people's relatives, he became more sensitized to the differences between men and women. "Coming back to the States was a huge shock to me because everywhere you look there's people in bikinis, and billboards at the mall, and stuff that gets sent to your house in the mail. It's everywhere you look, and I just never noticed it before." I respond that I felt the same way when I returned to the U.S. from Neve during my own Meor trip.

Susan adds that her isolation from secular society, induced by the facilities of the seminary, helped her to accept women's roles in Judaism, saying, that before accepting the Orthodox lifestyle, "I felt like, in order to be a strong woman you have to be a modern woman,

and a businesswoman, and a career woman, and that's how women can be valued. I thought that you're only a strong woman if men would take you seriously, which is funny because it's still completely dependent on men, right? I felt like if I walked into a business meeting and all the men would get nervous, then I would know I've made it." Susan's loyalty to what she calls the original feminist movement's flawed initiatives contributed to her perception that the role of Jewish women rendered them weaker than men. She explains, "Not that [the original feminist movement] didn't do a lot of things that weren't absolutely crucial, but a lot of it became, 'When we look like men and there's no difference, that's when we're equal.' By definition that's putting men as the superior, and everything female, everything inherently female, becomes degraded and becomes negative, or at least less than the male version." She felt it was important that at her seminary, women's roles were defined according to their inherent value to important Jewish concepts, like the home and family, rather than by their parity with men's roles.

Susan says she began to take an interest in Jewish gender roles when she learned that the home, and not the synagogue, is the vital organ of the Orthodox *halachic* body, the foundation of the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle. "When a new community is built, they start with the *mikveh*, not the synagogue. This is the central space for practicing Judaism," Susan says. The *mikveh* is a ritual bath house, and it functions primarily as the space in which women bathe to preserve family purity, or *niddah*, after menstruation or post-partum bleeding. "There's no man involved in the process at all. Unless you have a question you have to ask a rabbi, it's the woman at the *mikveh*, you're the one checking, and you're the one who goes to the *mikveh*." Susan also explains that since women are responsible for lighting Shabbat candles to initiate the day of rest, their roles are important for bringing one of the most important and frequent Jewish holidays to

the home. Finally, Susan learned that women's duties are crucial to the laws of *kashrut*, which are extremely important in Judaism, because they are responsible for preparing kosher food to be consumed by themselves and their entire families. "If women were second-class citizens," Susan argues, "you wouldn't trust her with the kosher of your home. It's a huge responsibility to make sure your family is keeping kosher." In sum, the female learning institutions Susan attended taught that women's agency is directly linked to the central component of Judaism: the home, and--by extension--the family.

While Susan takes pleasure in learning to read *parsha*, or weekly Torah portions, and commentaries in Hebrew, she also feels content with the complementarity engendered by fulfilling her role as a woman in the home, while her husband fulfills his role as a man charged with studying oral and written Torah. Susan tells me that women's jobs are outsourced in Western culture, in the practice of hiring nannies and chefs, and for this reason people do not appreciate the premium that Judaism attributes to the obligations of Orthodox Jewish women. Susan concludes by saying, "I've spent so much of my day doing things that, to me, I consider Jewish practice, like making dinner. Now I feel that creating a home that fulfills people and makes people go out in the world and do good things is so crucial. So I no longer need that feeling of breaking my teeth over a book," she finishes, motioning to her collection of Judaica literature. The following Shabbat, they hosted me for dinner.

### **The Paradox of *Tznius* Pedagogy**

These portraits convey the diverse and pervasive story-telling, imbued with gendered and feminist scripturalism, that Meor educators use to teach women about "modesty." Meor men, who also experience pedagogical story-telling from teachers and role models, use text as their

main learning tool. For women, access to written laws is given through story-telling of bikinis and basketball games, with minimal textual reference. There is no lack of explicit written Jewish laws about gender, and varying interpretations, yet women are unable to critically analyze the entire body of Jewish law relating to their obligations because the educational structure of Meor does not permit them access to the text--rather, only the interpreted behaviors are important for women to learn. While the men learn about their role in Judaism by studying the text, women are taught about Judaism solely as it relates to the gender roles established by the *yeshivah* men. Because of Meor's gendered-scripturalist teaching method, the men have primary access to interpretations of ideal gender roles, which are taught to women through story-telling at the seminary.

The goal of campus *kiruv* is to bring secular students "closer" to "authentic" Jewish tradition, found in the text; yet, gendered scripturalism creates a learning circumstance that allows men to have greater access to the Torah than women. Meor educators use "feminist scripturalism" to "bridge" the distance gendered scripturalism places between Jewish women and textual sources; feminist-scripturalist rhetoric accomplishes this by emphasizing women's decision-making power when they choose to dress and behave "modestly." This is evident in the three "portraits," when the story-tellers exaggerate the immense agency they gained when they exchanged their secular social identities for the Jewish gender laws taught at Neve. The paradox of these scripturalist strategies is clear: in order to initiate college women into this society that prioritizes closeness to "the book," Meor facilitates men's access to "the book" while it purposefully refrains from encouraging or facilitating the same literacy for women. Thus, as a result of gendered and feminist scripturalism, the women change their behavior the same way

that a puppet is made to dance: their movements are controlled by text, and the text is predominantly the domain of *yeshivah* men; therefore, arguably, the men “hold the strings.”

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **STUDENT MEMORIES OF KIRUV AT EMORY**

In Chapter Three I examined the pedagogy of female BTs who use story-telling to teach female Emory students to observe narrow interpretations of *tznius*; in this chapter, I use the narratives of Peripheral BTs<sup>6</sup> from Emory to give the perspectives of the students affected by contemporary campus *kiruv*. All students acknowledge gendered scripturalism by citing the differences between the curricula of the seminary and the *yeshivah*. Additionally, these students observe that women's behavioral modifications were empowering. In this way, gendered and feminist scripturalism pervades not only the stories told by educators, but also the experiences of men and women who participate in Meor programming.

The "portraits" are also manifestations of "selective scripturalism," the simultaneous omission of portions of codified Jewish law and the promotion of orthopraxies derived from narrow interpretations of textual law. Each student uses language that equates Judaism with observing specific *mitzvot*, and the most frequently mentioned are: *tznius* (women's clothing, *shomer negiyah*, and hair covering after marriage), Shabbat, and *kashrut*. Conversely, the "portraits" demonstrate that when students resist adopting any of these selective-scripturalist behaviors, they are accused of repudiating their entire Jewish identity.

Finally, in these "portraits" it is evident that the students' perceptions of heightened "religiosity" or "observance" are influenced by "hierarchical scripturalism," which links the augmentation of Jewish identity with increased behavioral expectations. In *Becoming Frum*,

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<sup>6</sup> See *Becoming Frum* (2012) by Sarah Benor



Sarah Benor provides insight into this phenomenon when she explains, “As BTs progress from Peripheral to Community and sometimes to Yeshiva/Seminary, they gain increasing access to roles, responsibilities and practices” (Benor 146). “Hierarchical scripturalism” is the key operating principle of Meor because of Rabbi Deutsch’s leadership and meticulous measurements of progress; the creation of new “follow-up” programs in the past year is arguably Rabbi Deutsch’s attempt to create more advanced “stages” in the BT trajectory. In the following “portraits,” gendered, feminist, selective and hierarchical scripturalism will be identified and analyzed.

### **1. Lauren\***

Lauren is a second-year student at Emory whose religious education began at a Reform Jewish preschool and continued at a Catholic elementary school, after which she transferred to a secular private school in an area of her California hometown “that was very Christian and WASP-y.” “Basically, I had no Jewish upbringing, whatsoever. We did Chanukah and Passover and Christmas and Easter, but I never knew what any of it was. I never knew Jewish history or stories.” Since her mother is Jewish and her father is Catholic, Lauren says, “*halachically*, I’m Jewish. In Judaism, you are whatever your mother’s religion is, but in Christianity you are what your father’s religion is.” Thus, in her first sentence Lauren refers to an important component of Orthodox Judaism: in order to be a Jew, one’s mother must be Jewish. This law, which is not lent credence by non-Orthodox American Jewish sects, demonstrates how feminist scripturalist rhetoric attributes agency and power to mothers and homemakers.

At the age of 11, Lauren attended the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs of her cousins, “and I thought it seemed cool to have a Bat Mitzvah because I wanted to learn and have a party.” The Bat

Mitzvah celebration entailed Lauren attending Hebrew School, where she learned to read Torah. Unfortunately, Lauren's parents were in a difficult financial situation because they had recently divorced. "My synagogue said that we couldn't go to Hebrew School if we couldn't afford it. I didn't want to make my mom worry about it, so I did not get my Bat Mitzvah when I was 13," Lauren recalls.

At the age of 15, Lauren accompanied her godmother to Rosh Hashannah services at a Conservative synagogue, "the closest thing to a spiritual experience I'd ever had." She returned the following week for Yom Kippur services "because I loved the first service so much." It was that year, Lauren says, "that I decided I wanted to go through with the whole learning process again, so I could finally have my Bat Mitzvah." She found a rabbi from a Conservative synagogue in her area, "and I explained that I didn't have any family support or money. But I told him, 'I'll do whatever you want me to do if you could teach me and so that I could have my Bat Mitzvah.'" Lauren remembers the rabbi responding, "I'd love to teach you, but you have to promise to stay committed. You can't have your Bat Mitzvah and then 'peace out.'" Lauren accepted his challenge, and instead of celebrating her 16th birthday with a "Sweet 16" party, Lauren read from the Torah for her Bat Mitzvah. She continued her Jewish learning through confirmation classes, where she learned with the Conservative Rabbi about "basics, like how to mourn when parents die, what it means to be kosher." When Lauren was confirmed, she told the rabbi that she wanted to continue learning. "He said, 'You're done, you learned it all, you're in good shape. I'm proud of you, good job.' I said, 'There has to be more, I have to learn more.' He told me to focus on school and to have fun in college, and I'd be great." For the remainder of

high school, Lauren enrolled in a program where she taught Sunday school children Bible stories, songs, and the *alef bet*, the Jewish alphabet.

When Lauren tells me what she “thought” Judaism was before coming to Emory, it is clear that not only has her conception changed, but that she considers the prior ideas flawed understandings. When Lauren graduated from high school, “I thought Judaism was a family. Every week I would go to services and they would open their arms to me, and they were so happy to see me. I also thought Judaism was a cultural thing. I didn’t have any idea about spirituality whatsoever.” When Lauren went to services each week, “I read the words” in the Hebrew prayer books “and I didn’t know what they meant.” Lauren says she chose Emory because she needed to enroll in a college “where I knew I’d be able to continue learning.” As soon as she entered Emory as a freshman she became involved with Chabad. “Chabad felt like a family, and it felt like I was going to a family’s house for meals.” The first time Lauren went to Shabbat dinner at the Emory Chabad House, “I remember there was a tent full of people, it wasn’t anything religious, it was just Shabbat dinner. It was nice, I enjoyed it, and I kept going back.” Lauren remembers that the first time she went to Chabad she wore pants and a tank top because “I had no idea” about the Orthodox dress code for women. “I had no idea what Orthodoxy was. I thought I was religious because I went to services every *Shabbos*.” Clearly, her conception of what it means to be “religious” has changed: she no longer considers one to be religious by virtue of being a weekly patron of Shabbat.

The first Orthodox environment Lauren encountered at Emory was Chabad; however, “I didn’t actually know it was Orthodox at the time. It wasn’t until I went to Israel with Meor, the winter of my freshman year, that I learned why Miriam, at Chabad, always wore a skirt. I didn’t

realize she wore a wig; I had never heard of that before. I also realized I had never shook the rabbi's hand, and that there is a reason for [not doing] that.” Lauren met Rabbi Fleshel, whose organization explained the Orthodox approach to Judaism to Lauren, in December, during finals period at the University. While Lauren was eating food at Eagles Landing, “where the kosher food used to be,” with a friend who had just finished the Maimonides program, “Rabbi Fleshel said ‘Hi’ to my friend and asked if he was coming for *Shabbos*; my friend said ‘Yes,’ and I chimed in, ‘Can I come, too?’” Lauren told Rabbi Fleshel that she had been involved with Hillel and Chabad, and that she was “looking to try something new.” She says Rabbi Fleshel was “very intrigued,” and they talked for the next 45 minutes about Meor's upcoming trip to Israel. “I told him I would love to go on Meor's trip next year. He looked at his phone, then he said, ‘Are you serious about coming? Because someone just dropped out from our trip, and we have a spot.’ This was literally two weeks before we were supposed to leave! It was on December 10th, and we left December 24th.” The only expense was Lauren's flight from California to New York, and a refundable \$250 deposit.

The quick arrangements made that day made Lauren believe that “the way that things worked out was so ... meant to be. There's no other way to explain how it all happened,” Lauren adds, referring to two fortunate events that followed her acceptance to the Israel trip. First, Lauren was amazed when “one of my girlfriends sat down while we were talking, and she said she wanted to go on the trip also. Rabbi Fleshel made a few calls and got her on the trip with me. So, my three best friends all got to go together.” Then, when the girls realized that both their passports were about to expire, they managed to expedite new passports within two weeks.

Thus, Rabbi Fleshel recruited two students to the Meor Israel trip, and the women were delighted by the quick acceptance.

For Lauren, Rabbi Fleshel was “the first Orthodox person that I met that I realized is Orthodox.” She didn’t have any expectations about the religious nature of her trip, except “I thought we might learn about keeping kosher and Shabbat. What more is there to learn?” When she first arrived at Neve seminary, “that was an experience, because I had never heard of seminary before. At first I just thought it was like a college.” Lauren had never learned the Jewish concept of modesty because growing up, “My mom was in fashion, so she definitely never wore anything modest.” She clarifies that while her mother did not dress “modestly” by Neve’s standards, Lauren does not think she dresses particularly scandalously. “I didn’t know skirts were even a thing, I didn’t know religious women don’t wear pants. So I brought skirts that were above-the-knee.” After studying at Neve, where women’s religiosity is conflated with gendered behavior, Lauren felt that in order to be “religious,” she could wear neither pants nor skirts above the knee.

Lauren identifies her first Shabbat in Israel with Meor as the event that showed her how beautifully Orthodox Jews practiced Jewish ritual. Before this trip, “I thought I ‘did’ *Shabbos*. I went to services, I did *hamotzi* and *kiddish* [prayers] at my Conservative synagogue, and I thought I was religious.” Before sunset on the first Friday evening, “All the kids were so excited for Shabbos, and I didn’t know what that meant ... I never had family dinners growing up. Family dinners consisted of my nanny cooking dinner for my brother and I, and then we’d both run back to our rooms and watch TV with our food.” Clearly, there is a contradiction in this story: if Lauren attended weekly Shabbat services, why did she not “know what that meant”

during her first Shabbat in Israel? The reason is that during this Shabbat, Lauren re-learned the meaning of Shabbat. The only advice Rabbi Fleshel gave Lauren before the holiday began was not to use her phone outside the privacy of her room, “and I thought, ‘OK, no problem, I can do that.’” She was unsure of what to expect that night.

Meor matched Lauren with a family, “who I am still in touch with today, because they are incredible people,” for Friday evening. She was inspired by the way her hosts celebrated the holiday and claims “that first *Shabbos* was my transformation point. I never sat down at a family dinner before where everyone was listening and engaged in conversation, and not texting under the table or leaving. Everyone was sitting there and enjoying being there. I was sitting down and felt how much love was in the house. The mom was lighting the Shabbat candles and everyone was watching her light the candles. Then when the father came back from *shul* all the kids ran and jumped into his arms. We sat down for the meal and he blessed all the kids, and they were so excited to be blessed by him and have him kiss their foreheads. He was asking all the kids questions about the *parsha*. It was a family experience I’d never had, especially since both my parents are divorced. I think that’s the reason why it resonated with me so closely. So at that Shabbat I thought, ‘I don’t know what this whole Torah thing is about, or this whole Jewish thing. But if this is what it practices, and this is what it produces, I want everything to do with it.’ And that was when I got really excited and engaged in the learning, and took everything I could out of it.” Lauren identifies Shabbat as the event that initiated serious changes in her Jewish identity. She says the warm family atmosphere during her Shabbat dinner “is” what Judaism “practices” and “produces”; she wanted to be a “true” Jew by emulating the practices of her hosts.

Once Lauren became inspired by her Shabbat experience, she became enamored with the lessons that Neve taught about the role of women in Judaism. “There’s all these beautiful things that women do. Men learn this, too; men learn to appreciate their wives and to appreciate women and to do things with them.” Lauren was deeply affected when she learned that the duties of Jewish women are crucial for the Jewish household. “I don’t know if you learned this, but if not for the woman, the house would not be Jewish. The woman has the understanding and extra element that keeps a home and makes a home a sacred place. That’s all the woman. The man can keep the *mitzvot* and the man can do everything, but he is nothing without the woman. And that is what I learned. And I really agreed with that, because, you know, men can cook Shabbos dinner, but it’s not *really Shabbos* without your wife. You know? The woman has to light the candles.” Shabbat dinner was a defining moment in Lauren’s transformation because not only did she approve of the way her hosts adhered to their gender laws, but she was also touched by the respect her Jewish hostess received from her husband; Lauren’s account demonstrates the convergence of gendered and feminist scripturalism in the informal Shabbat setting.

When Lauren returned to Emory after her trip, “I decided to start keeping Shabbos. Keep in mind, three weeks before that, I had no idea what *Shabbos* was. Very quickly I came back and said, ‘no exceptions, I’m keeping Shabbos. And kosher. And *tznius*.’” These were the three lessons that Lauren took from Neve and brought to Emory, three “practical” obligations that epitomize selective scripturalism in all forms. “I started taking on all these things, which was very radical of me, but that’s just the kind of person I am. I’m a very radical person; when I’m passionate about something, I go full force. I don’t half-ass anything. Judaism wasn’t an exception to that; it probably should have been, and I stepped back once I realized that Judaism

isn't something you can do that with. You can't just jump in and take on everything at once. It's a growing process. I realized that doing too much too soon was going to make me resent it and eventually step away from it altogether," she finishes, the words of hierarchical scripturalism still ringing in our ears as she begins to talk about the next step of her religious journey.

Lauren explains that since the Meor trip to Israel only gives subsidies to students who have completed the Maimonides I program, Rabbi Fleshel arranged for her to enroll in the class the semester that began after her Israel trip. "But then everyone I got close with on the trip was doing Maimonides II, and I wanted to be with them, so I ended up doing Maimonides I and II at the same time. It got to the point where I was learning something every day: Maimonides I, Maimonides II, Chabad lunch 'n learns, tutoring at a Jewish day school, then Shabbat on Saturday. It worked out that I was doing something Jewish each day; I was learning so much, and I was so happy." In this sentence Lauren equates behavior with observance, and when she says she was "doing something Jewish every day," Lauren means she was participating in Orthodox Jewish programming each day; for Lauren, Orthodoxy is Judaism, and Judaism is Orthodoxy.

Lauren told me that as soon as her first trip to Israel ended, "I decided I would go on Meor Vision, and that I would stay in Israel after the trip ended"; she would be eligible for this second free trip after she graduated from Maimonides II. She convinced her brother, who would be graduating at the end of the semester from a different college, to go to Israel with Meor on a trip that was timed to coincide with Meor Vision. "My brother didn't have any plans for the year after. He knew he wanted to go to law school eventually, but he had decided he definitely wanted to take a year or two 'off.'" Lauren describes her brother's attitude toward religion



before the Meor trip, saying he was “anti-religion but he would ask questions like, ‘What happens when I’m dead?’ We were raised in such a Christian area that the only people we could talk to were priests and fathers, Catholic people. My brother asked intense questions and he wanted profound answers, but he never got them. Instead, people would say, ‘We don’t ask those questions, we just accept God and Jesus.’ That was never satisfying for him.” Once he decided to focus on religion through the Meor program in Israel, “he graduated from college on a Sunday, and the following Tuesday he was on a plane to New York to go to Israel with Stanford’s Meor trip.”

One of the trip’s chaperones gave Lauren permission to join her brother’s trip for his first Shabbat in Israel, at a kibbutz in the north. She stayed in a hotel room with one of her brother’s *madrichot*: a recent Emory graduate, the president of a sorority at Emory who became religious after graduating; she now works at an Orthodox college, Yeshivah University. During Shabbat lunch, Lauren and her brother listened to Tom Steinberg, chairman of Meor, as he gave “his whole life story.” As she sat next to her brother, Lauren realized he was crying. “I’ve never seen my brother cry before, but that was the first time I did because Tom Steinberg’s story just struck a chord with my brother. He walked out crying when Steinberg was finished, and he said, ‘I feel like he’s speaking to me.’ My brother has an affinity toward successful people, he likes surrounding himself with successful people, he likes business, and he wants to make a lot of money. But he always thought religion would get in the way of that.” When Tom Steinberg shared his memories of working at Goldman Sachs and attending Stanford business school, “Tom Steinberg completely challenged everything my brother thought about that. That was the moment my brother decided he could do this whole religious thing also. I would say that’s the

moment he became curious.” Lauren and her brother sat next to the Steinberg family during the next meal, and her brother continued to engage in deep discussion with the rabbi hours after the meal ended.

It was during their time together in Israel that Lauren’s brother told her he wanted to stay in Israel for the rest of the year. Lauren explains that, “On Meor, he was finally challenging people, and they were challenging him back, which had never happened before. He’s never been able to argue with someone on a philosophical level like that, so he’s loving it. He’s really happy, and we are completely bonding because of it. We talk every day, and we are closer than ever.” She tells me she is excited that he is learning about the prayer *eishes chayil*, “women of valor.” She also tells me that he is learning about *shomer negiyah* and dating, which she wouldn’t have expected, given his background: “He was president of his fraternity, at a state school. He was crazy in college, and we were all really worried about him. My family is so appreciative that I got him to turn his life around, because he didn’t have any plans, didn’t know what he was going to do. He even turns his phone off for Shabbos now, and he never did that before.”

Lauren’s Meor Vision trip was “what I expected it to be. It definitely wasn’t as well organized as the original Meor trip. They had that trip down to a science. Mine [in summer 2012] was the second Meor Vision trip they ever did for girls, so we stayed at apartments, and they didn’t really know what to do with us. We learned at Neve, we had afternoons free, we had a few ‘activities’ planned, but that was kind of it.”

When Lauren became enamored with “keeping Shabbat” through observing all of the rules that she had learned at Shabbatons in Atlanta and in Israel, “My Dad didn’t understand

what that meant. He would wish me a happy Shabbat. It was fine until my dad booked my flight home from school at the end of my freshman year, and the flight left on a Friday night at 8:00 P.M.” A flight that departs that late at night would not only prevent Lauren from celebrating Shabbat dinner, it would also violate Orthodox Jews’ belief that no technology should be used after sunset on Friday night. “I called him immediately and said, ‘Thanks for booking my flight, but it’s on a Friday night, and I can’t even use my phone Friday nights, so I have to change it.’ He got very upset. He had booked flights for both my mom and I to leave at the same time, so he spent all this money for me to fly out, and it caused an absolute uproar in my family. I had been keeping *Shabbos* for four months without breaking it. I had gone to the Fleshels, Chabad, or Toco hills every week.” Lauren was scared that make exceptions for her secular family would compromise her ability to complete this stage of hierarchical scripturalism. She had been “keeping *Shabbos*” for so long that she did not want to “break” it, even once; what she does not consider, because of the strong selective scripturalism she has internalized, are the alternative ways Jews celebrate Shabbat. The “only” way to “keep” Shabbat is to stay off of planes at sunset, according to Lauren’s perception of Jewish law.

Lauren did not want to make her family angry, so she asked Rabbi Fleshel if the best decision would be to make an exception for this flight and maintain hope that her family would not make this mistake in the future. Lauren says that Fleshel advised, “You absolutely cannot do that. You have to hold your ground. If you fly home on a Friday night your parents will think you’ll give a little here and there every time, and if they accidentally do it again, they’ll mention you let it slide the last time.” Lauren took Rabbi Fleshel’s advice. “It was hard, but I told my dad I really couldn’t fly home. Rabbi Fleshel even found three people in the community who

offered to buy me a new plane ticket so I wouldn't have to fly on *Shabbos*," but Lauren never found out the identities of the three people who had offered to pay for a flight from Atlanta to California. With the support of Emory Meor and the anonymous donors, Lauren overcame all of the obstacles that could have prevented her from "keeping Shabbat"; the selective and hierarchical scripturalism taught by Meor were supported by the people in the community who offered to pay for her flight. Lauren was delighted that she did not have to break *Shabbos*, and Rabbi Fleshel was thrilled by her commitment to his interpretation of *Shabbos*.

Lauren remembers her friend, who had become more observant through Orthodox outreach programs at Emory--and transferred to another school because Emory no longer met her new religious needs--telling her, "Don't worry, Hashem will help you, Hashem will help you." "I was like, 'You're ridiculous, nothing is going to happen.' But somehow," she says of her Jewish development at Emory, "it really did end up working out."

## **2. Adam\***

I met Adam, an Emory junior, at the Emory Hillel center, where he works part-time, for our interview. Adam began by telling me that his mother is Jewish, but his father was not. Until Adam was in seventh grade, his Judaism was something covert and illicit, and it was only to be practiced when his door was closed and when his father was out of the room. Most nights, says Adam, "my Dad would come in and tell me to say my Catholic prayers that I was forced to have learned, and then when he walked out of the room I would take out a book called *The Bible for Jewish Children* and teach myself my real heritage," Judaism. Adam's mother had given him the book as a secret Chanukkah present, "back when we were hiding celebrating Chanukah from my Dad." Adam used this book to learn biblical stories, "like 'Joseph and the Technicolor

Dreamcoat,' stories of Moses and of the Jews at Mount Sinai.” He shelved the book discreetly, positioning it on his bookshelf so that “the binding of the book was facing the inside of the shelf, and you couldn’t see the title.”

When Adam’s father passed away, the seventh-grader, whose father tried to raise him as a Catholic, committed to developing his Jewish identity. He and his mother joined a Reform congregation while Adam was in seventh grade, and Adam enrolled in Hebrew School for the first time that year. “I had my Bar Mitzvah two days before my 14th birthday,” he recalls. “I came [to Hebrew School] the year everyone was leaving. They were leaving Hebrew School in the middle of the year because they were done with their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, but that’s when I was coming in.” Adam persisted in his Jewish education until he was confirmed by his Reform synagogue in 10th grade.

When Adam came to Emory, he describes himself as a freshman who was “not very involved” with Jewish life at Emory because he was “getting used to the way things are in Jewish life at the University.” He met Rabbi Fleshel during his sophomore year, and he enrolled in Maimonides during spring semester. After completing Maimonides I, Adam travelled to Israel with Meor’s Israel trip, where he studied at Machon Yaakov with the other men on the trip. At this *yeshivah*, Adam was particularly inspired by a speech he heard by Lawrence Kelemen, a Harvard graduate who wrote the books *Permission to Believe* and *Permission to Receive*. When he heard Rabbi Kelemen’s three-hour lecture about the divinity of the Oral Torah, “I ate up every second of it. I heard he’s from Harvard. He’s a smart guy speaking about rationality and Judaism. He gave a two-and-a-half hour explanation of the Oral Torah and it blew my mind because it was the first time that I saw that science doesn’t contradict Judaism.” By “Judaism,”

Adam means the Orthodox approach, which interprets every word of the Torah literally. “His book, *Permission to Receive*, about the Torah? I literally finished it in a day.” When I asked about the curriculum of his program at Machon Yaakov, he responded, “We didn’t really speak about relationships, or that kind of stuff, or at least as much as I know the girls learned about that kind of stuff. We studied straight up Talmud.” In this way, Adam acknowledges the gendered scripturalism in Meor’s formal classroom setting is by saying he is aware that his studies are text-based, while those of the women relate most often to behavior.

Adam remained at Machon Yaakov for the Meor Plus program after the rest of the original Meor Israel program departed for America. “All of the students in Meor Plus were not on the original trip, and I did not know them previously. Two of them were already Modern Orthodox.” On one of the first nights, Adam remembers, the staff organized a campfire where they held a discussion about “brain-washing.” Adam says the purpose of the event was to explain why the learning program did not meet the definition of “brain-washing”; Adam says he was never told the reason for the campfire setting. I asked Adam more about the Meor Plus curriculum, and he said, “We didn’t have one-on-ones in Meor Plus, but we met with the Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Taub, and he spoke to us in English because he knew we couldn’t do the Hebrew. The program was pretty much aimed toward kids who don’t know any of this stuff,” he says before adding, “Meor is outreach.” The “stuff” Adam mentions is the Orthodox approach to Judaism, to which secular, non-Orthodox students have minimal exposure.

Adam says that no one on his first trip became more “observant,” and “only people in the Meor Plus program became more religious.” After the second Meor Israel program ended, Adam recalls, “Outwardly, nothing changed” about himself. “Before hearing [Rabbi Kelemen] I never

gave Orthodoxy a second thought, but now...” Adam paused to turn his computer screen toward me. “Look: I was just looking up *tefillin*, and how to do it, and I find it interesting. I’m still exploring. Maybe *that’s* a huge shift,” he says, shrugging. He then shows me another website in his browser, called JerusalemOnlineU, which offers a \$100 stipend for completing an online course and attending “one to two live events coordinated by your campus adviser and a JerusalemOnlineU.com campus rabbi.” In order to be eligible for the stipend, the participants must be college students currently enrolled in an accredited university or college and between the ages of 18 and 26. He offered to help me complete the course “because I get \$10 for every person I refer to this program.”

### **3. David\***

I met David, an Emory senior, at his fraternity house, where Rabbi Yaakov would arrive a few hours later to teach a Maimonides class that is structured specifically for members of the fraternity. Says David, “Rabbi Fleshel targets Greek life, and he targets girls in ‘pretty’ sororities first. He brings them in to get the guys to come to his classes. He’ll deny it, but that is 100% what he does.” David suggests that most of the boys in his fraternity “probably” signed up for Maimonides because of the stipend.

In fact, even non-Jewish fraternity members tried to convince Rabbi Fleshel that they were Jewish in order to earn a spot on the Maimonides roster. “I heard that if I could make the rabbi believe I’m Jewish, I can do this 10-week class and get \$300,” says one non-Jewish fraternity member. As soon as this student sat down with Rabbi Yaakov, he says, “I told him that I have Jewish blood. He looked at me and said, ‘No you don’t.’ So I said, ‘You’re right.’”

David signed up for Maimonides “because of the learning. Money factored into it, but really I wanted to do it because my best friends did it, I had Monday nights free, I wanted to hear great speakers and get paid at the end. There’s no reason not to do it.” David did “nothing “Jewish” during freshman or sophomore year, no services or Shabbat. But I kept kosher.” Maimonides was the first Jewish program David experienced at Emory, and after it ended--fall semester of David’s junior year--he embarked on Meor’s three-week Israel trip in December 2011. “This trip was the first time in my life that Judaism was fun for me, and not about actions and observances, but thinking about life differently.” At *yeshivah*, Adam and the other men engaged with critical thinking; this radical departure from the seminary experience, which focuses on “actions and observances,” can be explained by the gendered scripturalism that structures Meor’s Israel programs.

David believes that Meor’s first trip to Israel “lights the spark” that ignites students’ curiosity about their Jewish heritage because “this trip was all about cool experiences” with Orthodox Judaism. In the mornings the male students would study Jewish law with the *yeshivah* staff who, David remembers, preferred to use the mens’ Hebrew names to maximize their immersion in Jewish learning. In the afternoons Meor’s tour-bus would take the Meor participants to afternoon activities “like laser tag and rock climbing.” Later in the afternoon, the class usually listened to a speaker, David recalls. “The trip was fun, and they didn’t force anything...It changes the way you look at Orthodoxy. It makes you think, ‘I could dig this.’” David explains, “You get intimate with people studying fun stuff, beliefs being challenged, and the main thing is you go through it together and you form a bond.” David became particularly fond of the Rosh Yeshivah, Rabbi Taub. “He was one of the most genius men I ever met. I had



these ‘whoa’ moments. After he spoke, my heart was beating so fast. I realized I’ve been living my whole life one way, and this,” the Orthodox lifestyle he was learning in Meor’s Israel trip, “could be it.” By engaging with Meor’s classes in Israel, David was not only inspired to become an Orthodox Jew, but also to make Orthodox Judaism the foundation for the rest of his life.

When the sun set on the first Friday night of David’s trip, David was eating dinner at a house in the neighborhood called Beit Shemesh. He stayed with a wealthy BT couple who regularly invite small groups of Meor students to their Shabbat dinners, and sometimes they host larger Meor events for bigger groups of students. “They were outgoing and fun, and it was cool to witness a family that’s gone through [a transformation from a secular to an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle].”

David told Rabbi Fleshel that the trip made him feel “definitely more happy than I was. I appreciate life.” Rabbi Fleshel responded by suggesting that David record five things that he appreciates every day, and that he review the list each month to remind himself to feel grateful. When he tells me this, David adds, “I never thought, before starting Maimonides, that I would come back from the trip inspired.” When the Meor Israel trip ended and David began Spring semester of his junior year, he decided to keep Shabbat each week by turning off his phone, going to services, and refraining from doing work. “I wore a *kippah* every Friday night and Saturday morning for a while during the second semester of my junior year. These things made me feel more Jewish.” David had been raised as a Conservative Jew, but he learned at *yeshivah* that Orthodox Jews do not view Conservative and Reform sects of Judaism as “real Judaism.” “Since they don’t follow the laws, they are not Jews,” was the reason given to David by the program staff-members.

David returned to Israel the summer after his junior year for the 2012 Meor Vision summer seminar, the second time it had ever been held. From David's perspective, "the second trip kindled the flame" lit by the spark from the first Meor Israel trip. "The second trip cements your Jewish identity. Without force or pressure, it gets you to realize that this life is right for you." This trip was different from the first, David believes, because everyone on Meor Vision "was there because they wanted to become more Jewish. They wanted to learn practices and rituals and start keeping the laws." When I asked him if these men were becoming more religious, he corrected me. "I would say more 'observant,' not more 'religious,'" explaining, "At the *yeshivah* we were taught that 'religious' is not the best word to use."

During the mornings, Rabbi Taub would teach classes, and at some point in the day Rabbi Lynn<sup>1</sup>, the executive director of Upenn Meor, would give another lesson. The staff at Machon Yaakov told David "to do baby steps, not all at once. They say, 'Don't go full kosher. Don't do too much too fast, or you will lose everything.' They say, 'It's not just about doing, but it's about understanding what you are doing.' If you study the purpose of wearing *tfillin*, prayer will become more meaningful." David believed that by following the hierarchical-scripturalist curriculum, he would be able to develop a holistic understanding of Judaism; in reality, the selective scripturalism inherent in this ascent to "observance" prevents neophytes from

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<sup>1</sup>Rabbi Shmuel Lynn, [bring up next line -- formatting issue]  
Executive Director

Born in the Big Apple, raised in Palm Beach, graduate of Duke University and NYU's Tisch Film School, Rabbi Lynn figured out early on in his career that most people are really writing and directing in Hollywood on the side in the hopes of one day becoming a Rabbi. He's one of the few who made it. Irony of all ironies, he once refused to even apply to Penn because it was too Jewish. Five years in Hollywood led Rabbi Lynn to the epiphany that what you see in the world and what the world wants you to see are sets on a stage and behind it lies a surprise much grander than the Wizard of Oz. A short hiatus (sabbatical in other cultures) in Jerusalem led to a longer one, and yet again to an even longer one, culminating in his engagement and marriage to Ruthi (see below). Sometime between the Chuppah and Naftali's first steps (born in the Rosey maternity ward in Cambridge where mommy was putting the finishing touches on a lucrative degree), Rabbi Lynn got his big break and changed careers, heading straight back to Jerusalem for a reciprocal five years of Torah study and rabbinical training. Four kids later, he landed in Philly (stranded, more like it) and made the most of it. He may not so readily admit it, but he loves what he's doing and where's he's doing it. <http://www.upennjews.com/meetthestaff.html>

understanding any interpretations of Judaism that are not narrowly defined and rigorously enforced. David remembers a “shmooze box” that the staff placed at the front of the room for “any questions we might have about life,” and the instructor would choose one inquiry to address each day. He trusted his instructors, and he felt that they were trying their best to give him all of the answers.

“If I was a girl,” David contends, “there is *no* way I would consider the Orthodox life. Girls learn about how to keep Shabbat and how to be a Shabbos bride and queen, and mystical stuff. Guys learn about interesting stuff, like laws.” David is acutely aware that the curriculum of his female counterparts at Neve is not only starkly different, but also that these lessons hold less value in the Jewish world than “interesting stuff, like laws.” Despite David’s conviction about the lack of appeal of Orthodoxy to female Emory students, he observed that the women in Meor programs converted their lifestyle to that of Orthodox women to nullify their previous promiscuity. “The girls from Emory dressed like total sluts at school, but in Israel they covered themselves up. It seemed fake, like they were buying into the Orthodox lifestyle to find a Jewish husband. Meor programs give these kinds of girls an ‘out.’” By claiming that Meor gives women an “out” through teaching them to dress modestly, David’s remark demonstrates how the “practical” gendered obligations taught at Neve are received by the female participants: they use the lessons about modesty to generate respect from men, but Adam indicates that their modifications engender contempt among men in the corresponding *yeshivah*.

During the afternoons, the Meor students were asked to research a Jewish commandment using the library of the *yeshivah* and the guidance of the rabbis at the school. For this project--which is affiliated with PERI--David chose to focus on the Orthodox approach to relationships

because “I’m a typical guy, I love thinking about women.” When he began his research, David chose from among his *yeshivah*’s library collection *The Magic Touch*, which introduced him to a Jewish idea that “Physical contact [between men and women] makes you feel close to the other person, so you believe you are emotionally close.” He also read Chana Levitan’s *I Only Want to Get Married Once* for his research. David explained the message of his final product: “Man is created in God’s image, so God is the ultimate giver. Relationships are based on taking, but a relationship with God is about giving to other people. You get happiness by giving to your significant other.”

Unfortunately, in the secular world, according to David, “the ways we look for relationships is by going to bars. Secular relationships start with the body and a hook-up, a touch, then they go to the heart when you like the person, then the mind thinks about whether you have compatible values. The divorce rate is low in the Orthodox community because they start with values, and finally when you get married, it’s with the body.” In fact, in 2008 Michael Salamon reported that the divorce rate was approximately 30%. “The touch,” David concludes, “can’t be the foundation of the relationship ... It should be what cements it together.” David’s reflection demonstrates that men reinforce the “practical” *tzniut* lessons taught to potential Baalot Teshuvah, such as *shomer negiyah*. Furthermore, David indicates that physicality is capable of both damaging and nurturing healthy relationships; this perpetuates the feminist scripturalist idea that women can either be disempowered by touching at the wrong time, or empowered by waiting for the right time. David formed a romantic connection with a woman on the trip who was becoming more “observant,” but after speaking to the Meor rabbi the woman ended the relationship; she told David she had been advised that he needed time to “mature Jewishly”

before they could have a meaningful relationship. David indicates that Rabbi Fleshel convinced the woman that he was not “Jewish enough yet.” The rabbi’s intervention nettled David because after David learned how to have a healthy relationship, the rabbi subsequently assumed control of David’s courtship with the woman.

During Meor Vision, David was assigned a personal tutor who was “just like me. He loved sports, he was outgoing, and he was really ‘there for you.’ He wants you to be the best person you can be.” His tutor, who was also his roommate, played guitar for the rapper Rick Fox before becoming religious. A Baal Teshuvah who spoke of his impending marriage, the man had just finished his second year at the *yeshivah* and was mentoring the Emory Meor men in Israel. By the end of David’s three-week program, “he knew I was struggling with what I want out of life, that I didn’t know what I wanted from a family or a job, and that I couldn’t write it down.” David’s tutor compiled a Powerpoint, which David shared with me, and told the incoming college senior that “after filling in the blanks, I’ll know where I want to go in life.” David never completed the assignment, but the slides had a profound impact on his post-graduate planning process: he deliberated whether to accept his job offer, or to abandon his school and career ambitions for *yeshivah* study.

The Powerpoint was sent via email. The subject is, “For you my friend,” and the enclosed message reads: “Please, please take the time to review and try to fill out at least the last two charts before you leave. I believe in you man!” The file was titled David’s “2012 Decision Making Tree.” The first slides tell David to write descriptions of himself and “the ideal me.” Other slides ask “what will my family look like?” in the short and long term, and “what am I doing for my *neshamah* (soul)?”--also in the short and long term. The first of the two slides that

the tutor, in his email, instructed David to prioritize over the others says, “Should I go to Yeshiva ever?” Underneath, there are two lists: one says, “let’s go baby!” and beneath are columns for “pros” and “cons”; the second list states the alternative choice: “Workaholic,” and provides two more corresponding columns for “pros” and “cons.” In large, bold letters at the top of the last slide, the tutor wrote the question, “Should I go to Yeshiva now?” The two options are, “Let’s go baby!” or, alternatively, “Finish school.” As we look at the Powerpoint, David explains, “He wanted me to consider going to *yeshivah* and deferring senior year [of college]. As much as I loved [*yeshivah*]--I was so swept up with it--but I still had to deal with my parents. I knew I needed to graduate now, and that I couldn’t wait two years.” Of the 13 men on David’s trip, three committed to go to *yeshivah* immediately, but two eventually “backed out.”

David recounts an unpleasant encounter with coercion during his first visit to Israel with Meor: a Meor rabbi from a different college campus forced all of the young men to wrap *tfillin* while davening at a holy cave. “I had never put *tfillin* on before,” David explains, “and I had to put it on just to do it. I didn’t like this forced aspect.” While acknowledging feeling discomfort during this confrontation, David believes Meor’s intentions are dissociated from coercive techniques. “The big joke [at David’s *yeshivah*] is that this trip is ‘brain-washing.’ I always thought Meor was sort of a ‘brain-washing’ thing. It’s not. We learned at Machon Yaakov that brainwashing occurs when beliefs change because of emotional lores. This trip didn’t force me to believe in anything specific,” David says, invoking the reasoning of the *yeshivah* staff. The *yeshivah* staff appears to have anticipated accusations of “brain-washing,” and they were prepared to persuade the students that theirs was an organization not associated with coercion.

At the same time, David concedes that “Fleshel pressures. He believes that he doesn’t, but when he says, ‘You want to be a good Jew, but you don’t do a certain commandment,’ it’s off-putting.”

“What I just loved,” David says of Machon Yaakov, “The main thing was the sense of community. If I didn’t understand a prayer, a brother--” David corrects himself, “whoops, I just said brother. It’s guys living together, it’s a Jewish fraternity, essentially. We need Rush Machon Yaakov 2013 t-shirts,” he jokes. What David intended to say was that the “brothers,” the staff at Machon Yaakov, were eager to help the students interpret the Hebrew texts through interpretations unique to this *yeshivah*. In David’s intimate environment, he says, “the rabbis know which people are coming back to the *yeshivah* with a ‘spark,’ and they provide extra attention to help the student maintain his inspiration.”

#### **4. Eliza\***

After eating at Rabbi Fleshel’s Shabbat table on a Friday night in December, I interviewed my friend Eliza at my house. Eliza and I had completed Maimonides together when we were second-semester freshmen, and we were also on the same Meor Israel trip the summer after our Freshman year. Eliza says she was raised “traditional,” meaning “I was brought up in a very Sephardi home. We had Shabbat dinners, but my Mom never lit candles or anything. We never *observed* Shabbat, but we always had Shabbat dinner, which was a family dinner every Friday night. We keep a kosher home, we have separate dishes, and my Mom only buys kosher meat.” Eliza’s parents were lenient about consuming non-kosher food at restaurants, “but nothing is really brought into the house--meat-wise--that isn’t kosher.” She says that she was familiar with Orthodox Judaism before coming to Emory because “one of my uncles is religious, and the other is Chabad, so I know what this life is like.”

When Eliza entered Emory in 2009 she was “completely detached from anything [Jewish], especially first semester,” and she “hardly went to Shabbat dinner.” She gradually became involved in Jewish life through Hillel, Chabad and Meor, but she was not “particularly interested” in Hillel after her first Shabbat dinner with this student group. “I don’t know this rabbi who runs it now, but I don’t go anymore because freshman year I never had a warm experience there, so I’ve never gone back.” Eliza says that she goes to Chabad almost every week for Shabbat dinner “with my friends, and we all sit at a table together. It feels like the six of us are sharing a Shabbat meal.” Eliza also frequents the Fleshels’ Shabbat table, which she feels is “more like a community setting: everyone sits around one table, there’s a ‘question of the night,’ and you get more of the religious environment.”

During spring semester, 2010, Eliza was introduced to Rabbi Fleshel through Maimonides, and subsequently traveled to Israel with Emory’s Meor organization. At the end of this summer, Eliza entered her sophomore year at Emory intent on attending Shabbat dinners each week and keeping kosher. “Over the summer when I went to Israel, they gave us these Shabbat candles, and it brings something different--it makes the week different by lighting the candles.” Hers were the same Shabbat candles Rabbi Fleshel gave me during the first Meor Israel trip; he offered the women on our trip these elaborate silver furnishings at the end of our trip in exchange for our promises to light them each week for Shabbat.

Eliza remembers that when she came back from Israel, her mom jokingly teased her about becoming “brain-washed.” “My Mom has no issue with anything I’ve been doing up until this point because she went through the same phase, where she became a bit more observant, you could say, in her early twenties. She thinks it’s just a phase that I’ll grow out of. But she called



it ‘brainwashing’ because she saw I went on this program, I met all these amazing people, I was showed this wonderful lifestyle that everyone keeps, and there’s definitely a connection.” For this reason, “it’s kind of ‘brain-washing’ because they introduce you to all these amazing people that you are like, ‘Wow, this is like such a great thing. I want this: a healthy family, a great environment to raise my kids in.’ But then you come back to America--to reality--and you’re like, ‘O.K., this is not what I actually want.’” In this statement, Eliza encapsulates the meaning of Judaism that was taught at Neve: for her, committing to Judaism denotes a lifestyle that is most conducive for raising children. Eliza’s statement conveys how the gendered scripturalism--”practical laws”-- taught at Neve are oriented toward the woman’s place as a mother and homemaker; moreover, she understands gendered behavior as an expression of agency.

Eliza went to Israel with Meor for a second time on Meor Vision in summer, 2012. “This time,” says Eliza, “I was a bit more understanding of what I was getting myself into. I am totally comfortable with who I am, what I do, and how Jewish I am. It doesn’t affect me the same way as [it would for] someone who goes on this program and has *no* clue about Judaism, and who connects *so* well, and then thinks that becoming religious is the only option.” She also discusses the most salient issues discussed at Neve that summer: “‘Shomer’ was the topic that ‘got to’ a lot of girls on the trip: understanding what it means. How can you go from our world where everything is physical, to touching nothing? We called it ‘shomer consciousness.’ It means there is no need to be flirty or overly touchy to guys for no reason. If you like them, respect yourself. We decided it’s about protecting your own body and not giving it to whoever is there.” Eliza eloquently reiterates the gendered scripturalism that composes Neve’s curriculum by telling me

that the focus was on “shomer” or guarding one’s behavior; at the same time, she considers these behaviors ways of “protecting your own body,” implying that they are an expression of her autonomy.

Eliza wanted to “guard” Shabbat and physical interactions with men, but “Once I was back in America, the hardest part was implementing what I learned. At first, I was ‘into’ everything Jewish. Then, I adapted back to American life. I realized that I just had to start doing things *more* Jewish, because I felt like I was losing everything I had just learned by going out, doing silly things, and not remembering to keep Shabbat and *shomer negiyah*.” Eliza’s concern with being “Jewish” and “more Jewish” conveys that her understanding about Judaism aligns with the lessons taught at Neve. About two weeks after she returned from Meor Vision, Eliza began dating an American Jew who did not keep Kosher. “That didn’t bother me at the time, but I realized that if it had been a week earlier, I would have said, ‘Of course it matters!’” Although Eliza could not follow through with all of her religious commitments, she says Meor Vision changed her perspective of life. “It’s difficult because I am 20 years old, and I don’t know what I want. At school it is hard to know what you want: you’re surrounded by drinking and studying, and too busy in the present to think about the future.” When she left Neve, the director of the programs parting words were, “I’ll work something out for you if you ever want to return to Israel.” She was told she could call anybody from the “extended community” of Har Nof when she returned to Israel, whether for advice or a place for Shabbat.

When Eliza first learned how the Meor programs structure Shabbat, “I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is crazy. Why would I turn my phone off?’” The person who influenced Eliza’s Jewish commitments most was a friend she had met on Meor’s Israel trip in 2010 who was also

returning for the Meor Vision seminar. Regarding the use of her cell phone on Shabbat, Eliza adopted a different approach modeled after this friend's. "Surprisingly, it was none of the rabbis who influenced my decisions to become Kosher and to keep Shabbat," Eliza reflects. "[My friend] started turning her phone off, and she said, 'You should try it, it's so relaxing,' blah-blah-blah. So I did it. Maybe the rabbis indirectly had an influence, because I went on these programs and met these people through them. But it wasn't that I discussed with a rabbi, 'Hey, I'm thinking about doing this.'" Together, Eliza and her friend experimented with the Jewish commitments they were taught through Meor and Neve classes, and they kept their cell phones off from Friday night at sunset until the following evening.

Eliza feels that she makes decisions about when and how to express her Jewish identity independently. "Now," says Eliza, "I observe Shabbat in my own way. I don't use my phone on Shabbat--that started over the summer--and I actually really like it. It's a break from the world; I don't feel like I owe anyone anything. I use my phone for everything and it's so nice to turn it off and not have to communicate with anyone. If I make plans with someone, I make them before [Shabbat begins], and we stick to the plan, and it works out, for the most part. I like it a lot," she concludes, "and it's something I'll continue to do." She frames her approach to Judaism by emphasizing agency: she finishes with "it's something I'll continue to do," indicating that what she *does* is an expression of her own will.

Eliza describes how she imagines her future when I ask "where" she feels herself to be in her "religious transformation": although she received an employment offer from a prestigious company, she says she wants to live in Israel before her start date. "I'm still undecided if I'm going to learn or to volunteer [in Israel]. But, I'm leaning toward Jewish learning, also because

they'll pay for everything;" we laugh at this, since we have both received phenomenal compensation for our time with Meor, in stipends and Israel trips. "When I talked about this with my Mom, she said, 'You're not going to come back religious on me,' and I said, 'No. I know what I want, and the reason why I'm going is because I want to formulate a Jewish base in my education so I can teach my kids.'" She adds that her ultimate goal is to observe Shabbat, keep a traditional home, and keep kosher; she is also adamant about not covering her hair after she gets married and about retaining modern style of dress, like pants. "Family comes first," she proclaims. Eliza, who has been exposed to the gendered scripturalism of Meor's curriculum for almost four years at Emory, articulates that the most important part of her Jewish identity is her role as a wife and home-maker.

In addition to her personal story, Eliza volunteers her perspective of the Jewish programming at Emory. "I think that what these programs are really geared towards," she suggests, is a demographic of students with weak Jewish background who will see "being religious as the only option" after the learning. Says Eliza, "[Meor programs] have a negative stigma, I think, because of that. There's kids who are Jewish who are yearning for something that is so deep, and they want to connect to something so well. Basically, the more you learn about Judaism, you will find there will always be questions you can ask. Even the scholars, rabbis, are so learned, but they still have questions every day, and I think that's what draws a lot of people in: you're allowed to question it, you're allowed to say, 'I don't agree with that.' But for me, I'm so comfortable with what I want for the future that going on these programs now, at this point, doesn't really affect me, or 'brain-wash' me. Because I know what I want." Because Eliza had prior encounters with Orthodoxy through her family, she feels that Meor's program

presents one approach to Judaism that is worth considering; conversely, she suspects that Jewish students without an Orthodox background may see this Orthodox Judaism as the “only option” for Jewish identity. Meor’s educational classes enhanced Eliza’s ability to make informed decisions about her religiosity, but she indicates that they may have the opposite effect on students with less “traditional” Jewish backgrounds.

When I asked Eliza what she thinks the goals of each Jewish organization are, she said that the goal of Meor is “to increase Jewish learning,” while the goal of Chabad is “to give you an idea of what the cultural side of Judaism is. They do fun activities to get you involved in the holidays and stuff. They market it, basically, toward college students.” Then Eliza corrects herself. “Not to say that Maimonides doesn’t do that, but they do it in a different way because the main focus of Maimonides is the [Meor] Israel trip. Chabad’s main focus, while they do have Israel trips, is to do activities to get students to come and participate in Shabbat dinner, in the holidays.” In order to achieve these goals, “They do offer an incentive for a lot of students; money is a huge incentive.” She suggests that many people may think, “‘Let me just sit through a class and I’ll get \$300.’ Why not? You’re a college student, you want money.” According to Eliza, other incentives include “giving students opportunities like trips to Israel, and making Judaism a social thing.” If Meor’s main strategy to “market” Judaism is through their Israel trips, then their “product” is shelved at the seminary and *yeshivah* in Israel.

Before Eliza and my interview is finished, we discuss the outreach that has proliferated on our campus: “When our great grandparents were in Europe, Judaism, I think, used to be such a big focus. And especially with American Jews, they strayed away from that a lot. But there’s been a huge movement now to get our generation more involved in Judaism because of this idea

of an American Jew who only knows about eating matzo on Passover and going to synagogue on Yom Kippur. Those are the two main things I think every American Jew will do. But these movements are trying to get people to connect back to our roots, and I think to what our great-grandparents--or grandparents, even--had, this lifestyle of Judaism: having Shabbat dinner, or doing something along those lines, like being traditional. I know for me, growing up, I was always super traditional and that's why I connect so well to these programs," she explains. For Eliza, "our great grandparents in Europe" epitomize "traditional," Judaism, and "tradition" is considered "authentic": selective scripturalism imbues every word of her definition of Judaism.

Eliza concludes, "It just feels like home, especially on campus. When I started getting involved sophomore year, it was like a home environment, I felt so comfortable going for Shabbat dinner because it was something that I enjoyed doing. And gradually it has become something more part of my life."

## **5. Mark\***

When Mark came to Emory in August 2012, he was already familiar with Chabad and Meor because he visited the University to meet with two of Emory's campus rabbis during his senior year of high school. A Modern Orthodox Jew, "I was proactive" by arranging to meet with Rabbis Lipskier and Fleshel, explains Mark, "so that I didn't put myself in a situation where I had no access to kosher food." Mark had already decided that he would maintain his Jewish identity in college "by at least keeping kosher." He also wanted to see how popular Shabbat dinners are at Emory on Friday nights, because "I wanted to go to Shabbat dinner on Friday nights during college and not be the only kid there."

When Mark asked Rabbi Lipskier whether Emory would provide a Jewish environment suitable for his religious background, he says “Zalman told me not to come here. He said all the Modern Orthodox kids who come here are not even Jewish after six months. They eat pork and they stop going to Shabbat. He told me instead to go to [another university in the Northeast with a high Jewish population] even though I had no interest in that school.” Mark’s brother, who works for Chabad at George Washington University, told Mark that Chabad rabbis frequently tell Modern Orthodox and Orthodox students not to come to Emory when they visit the University during high school; according to Mark, they advise the student to go to either Maryland University, Rutgers, Brandeis, or a select number of other schools. Even though Zalman initially discouraged Mark from coming to Emory, “The second you get on campus, Zalman is going to do everything he can to make sure your Jewish needs are taken care of. If one day there was no kosher food on campus, even if he had told you not to come here, he would go out of his way to make sure you could find something to eat.”

Mark’s brother was also familiar with Rabbi Fleshel because he had participated in the Emory Meor’s joint Israel trip with GWU previously, so Mark met Rabbi Fleshel during his visit. When Mark told Rabbi Fleshel about his experience with Chabad, “Rabbi Fleshel told me that Zalman ‘gets’ kids from New York to come to Emory, but that they frequently drop out because their Jewish backgrounds clash [with Emory’s culture]. He told me that he is an expert on GWU, and he told me I should come here.” Mark ate both Shabbat meals at the Fleshels’ house because “it was less of a walk than Chabad,” and Rabbi Fleshel took Mark and his parents to daven at Beth Jacob. “I asked him what he thought of the Young Israel congregation,” a popular synagogue whose membership includes several members from Emory’s distinguished Jewish

faculty, including Deborah Lipstadt, Ken Stein, David Blumenthal, Eric Goldstein, Michael Berger, Don Seeman, Ellie Schainker, and Zev Farber. “Yaakov said that the Young Israel rabbi thinks women don’t need to cover their hair.” Rabbi Fleshel dismissed the Young Israel rabbi because his perspective regarding women’s obligation to cover their hair after marriage does not align with the perspective Fleshel considers *halachically* correct; in short, Rabbi Fleshel disapproves of the way “practical” laws are taught to female congregants of young Israel because they deviate from the behaviors taught by the gendered-scripturalist curriculum of Meor.

Mark knew that Rabbi Broyde, the founding rabbi of the Young Israel congregation, was in fact one of the top candidates for the Chief Rabbi of England. “His legal analysis is known to be ridiculous[ly brilliant], and his focus is Jewish law[...]He never says women don’t need to cover their hair, but rather that there are many opinions about it and that it’s not terrible.” Mark heeded the Rabbi’s *davening* advice that day, despite being confused when the rabbi discredited the alternative Jewish *shul*. When Mark entered Beth Jacob, “I couldn’t believe how many people were wearing black and white, how *yeshivish* it was.” Mark went to Beth Jacob several more times, and describes it as a place where “the people are nice, and they always invited me for Shabbat, but it was a very Charedi environment. The people there are mostly *Baalei Teshuvah*. When I went there for Yom Kippur, the rabbi asked if it was the first time I was fasting. I’ve fasted every year, I thought it was a strange question.” Mark was annoyed that Fleshel had critiqued Rabbi Broyde and he adds that eventually, “I went to Young Israel, and it was awesome.”

Mark enrolled in Maimonides I during the first semester of his freshman year, reasoning, “What else am I doing on a Wednesday night? And, I get paid \$300.” There were two



Maimonides I classes in session in fall 2012, and Mark's group consisted of many girls from the sororities Delta Delta Delta and Kappa Alpha Theta because they had been recruited by certain members of the sorority community. One of Mark's favorite speakers was Perry Brickman, the man who coordinated the momentous apology Emory's President Wagner offered the former Jewish students of Emory's dental school who failed to complete their studies because of their anti-Semitic dean. He also enjoyed Judge Danny Butler's speech, which he felt effectively conveyed the message "just to be thankful and to be a good person."

Mark believes that "the idea coming from Meor's headquarters is good. The idea of education is a great idea because even if you don't want to be religious, you should at least know what you're rejecting. Most of my friends don't know what Judaism means, but I've personally read up about it. I chose my college based on being Jewish. I am going to choose my wife and where I want to live based on being Jewish. How shallow would it be to marry someone Jewish for no reason? I may as well know what 'being Jewish' means." Like Eliza, Mark felt that Meor's approach to Jewish learning presented him with another option that he could pursue; thus, he did not internalize selective scripturalism.

However, Mark emphasizes that "a lot of text-based Jewish law is more intellectual, and harder to teach because drawing on commentators is important. I felt like Rabbi Fleshel just talked about what he wanted to talk about." He also does not think Rabbi Fleshel's explanation of Shabbat was the best way to communicate the meaning of the weekly festival. "I think Zalman does a good job because he says there needs to be a system of law," says Mark, using Rabbi Lipskier's first name instead of his official title, as is common among Emory students who have a close relationship with the campus rabbis. Mark thinks that the class Rabbi Fleshel gives

on relationships “is kind of an awkward way to present the idea of a Jewish relationship. There are a lot of positives. But he explained it by talking about *shomer negiyah* instead of talking about abstinence before marriage. He said that one time he touched his wife before marriage and it was amazing. And he talked about how you don’t feel empty after Jewish relationships. But, I don’t know if that’s the most enticing part about Judaism,” he points out. Mark observes that the way the Meor rabbi presented healthy Jewish relationships neglected many relevant Jewish teachings; instead, Rabbi Fleshel “sold” students on Jewish relationships by persuading them that they would absolve the “emptiness” of secular relationships. The “emptiness” Fleshel assigns to couples who touch before marriage is similar to the anti-feminist rhetoric of Baum, and this class is thus arguably another application of feminist scripturalism.

One class that was particularly unimpressive to Mark was the class that Rabbi Fleshel teaches about “soul types.” “It means nothing,” Mark says. “It’s Fleshel’s way to make believe he can read your soul and tell your future.” Mark does not see the connection between “authentic” Judaism and efforts to interfere in the personal affairs of “people who you barely know.” He admits that this class was the favorite of the sorority girls in his session. Mark also did not expect how forthcoming Rabbi Yaakov would be about offering guidance to students. “I saw him interviewing a girl he had just met maybe five minutes earlier. He asked her major, then he started giving her advice. To my knowledge, Judaism doesn’t teach that.” Based on these observations during the Meor programs, Mark feels that one purpose of Emory Meor’s strategies is “a way to try to get close to people.” Mark’s experience is similar to my own, at the end of my internship in Israel, when the program coordinator insisted that she “knows” me.

Mark continued to describe a final sentiment about the Maimonides program: he was skeptical about the quality of learning because Rabbi Fleshel never used any text during his classes. “The beautiful thing is there are more interesting and amazing things Jewish writers say, and deeper, more intellectual concepts.” Two of Mark’s professors asked the class to refrain from using Rabbi Fleshel’s input in academic writing, which they feared would “give a ‘dumbed-down’ view of Jewish topics, which are very complicated. Fleshel takes it personally,” Mark adds, saying that this makes Fleshel “worried they think he doesn’t know the academic side of things.” Mark’s experience demonstrates that despite the fact that gendered scripturalism reserves textual analysis for men, the lessons taught to men are do not *always* use Torah.

Mark traveled to Israel with Meor Vision in December 2012, where he studied at Machon Shlomo. His motivation: “I wanted to go to Israel in December because I wanted to visit my high school friends who were taking ‘gap years’ at *yeshivot* and seminaries.” The most interesting part of Mark’s trip, he says, was speaking to the different leaders of Meor. “Tom Steinberg and Rabbi Gershenfeld want to get people to come to *yeshivah*,” says Mark. But another Meor professional, Yoni Greenwald, “has a completely different goal. He thinks that education should be a natural process that isn’t forced on anybody.” I met Yoni on my first Meor Israel trip, when he kindly drove me back to the airport after I accidentally took the wrong suitcase from the baggage claim. Mark approved of Yoni’s technique of holding frequent meetings with all the *madrichim* to make sure everyone was enjoying the trip. Yoni told Mark he used to work with Birthright, but he always imagined how effective a follow-up program—one that banned nametags, which he considers bad for social interactions--would be. “I think he’s

more realistic: he named two issues that I should deal with and said that I would be fine. I think that was a good approach.”

Mark remembers that he was unimpressed by Meor’s Gematria class, which teaches that there is a mystical meaning behind the Hebrew letters of Jewish law. Mark says “The Bible Codes Guy” came to his high school “because we had Charedi teachers who were in charge of the special events,” in addition to Modern Orthodox instructors with alternative views of Judaism. After the speaker left, Mark says, his non-Charedi high school teachers gave him “four conclusive proofs” disproving Bible codes. “I could tell you that there are numerous proofs against all the stuff taught in my class from the Gemara. Hebrew letters we use now are different than the ones in the original texts. Every mathematician has signed a statement saying bible codes are false,” says Mark. Because Mark had been disillusioned about Bible Codes before college, he was skeptical about the accuracy of this Meor class. Had he not gone to a Jewish day school--as is the case for his non-Orthodox peers in Emory Meor programs--where his teachers dispelled The Bible Codes Guy’s theories, he would not have the ability to critically evaluate the Guy’s claims alongside the counterarguments that invalidate them.

Mark says he did not realize that Meor was a *kiruv* organization until Fleshel “began to rip on Modern Orthodox [*yeshivot*], saying that those types of students come to college and do not want to be religious. That was one of my biggest qualms with Meor.” In classes at the *yeshivah*, Mark said he was frustrated by “the way they present one specific sect or ideology of Judaism. They present this as the only way Judaism can ‘work.’ A smart argument would include acknowledging positives and negatives to all types of Judaism. You can have proofs without using emotions to make an argument for your case. Don’t tell me, when I talk about

Chabad or Modern Orthodoxy, that they are bad; be Orthodox on your own.” Although he does not elaborate on the specific wording of Meor’s critique of other Jewish denominations, Mark concedes that “they make a good point by asking, ‘what does Reform and Conservative mean? If you can’t answer that question, you are not Reform or Conservative, you’re just ignorant.” Although he approves of the questions raised about other Jewish sects, he was irritated by the answer: Meor educators proclaimed all approaches to Judaism that are not taught by Meor or its affiliates as illegitimate or wrong; Mark did not accept this selective approach to scriptural “authenticity.”

When Mark told the *yeshivah* staff that he was considering enrolling in an Israeli *yeshivah*, the staff of Machon Shlomo “told me this was the *yeshivah* for me, which was horrible.” He explains that one of the most important considerations that factors into a potential *yeshivah* student’s decision-making is the kind of *yeshivah* environment they desire: “There is not one right place. Even if it teaches the right philosophy, it might not be the right social environment.” Mark says he would not prefer to attend Machon Shlomo because it “is one of the Baal Teshuvah *yeshivot* that want you to be Haredi and go to the kollel for the rest of your life.” Mark did not show up for any of the one-on-one sessions Meor scheduled with his tutor, a Baal Teshuvah. “If you have a personal conversation with anyone at Machon Shlomo, they’re trying to force you to do something. I wouldn’t tell people to put on *tzitzit*,” the article of clothing men wear with 613 tassels--representing the Torah’s 613 *mitzvot*--“before they believe in it. I would teach them, then they can do what they want to do. Just doing actions is orthopraxy.” Because Mark felt coercion from the Meor teachers, he considered it an intrusion on his personal

autonomy. More importantly, Mark recognizes the difference between orthopraxy and actions that have meaning in Jewish text.

On the flight back to America, all of the students on Mark's trip filled out a survey "so that the donors can see if Jews are marrying Jews and if Jews are considering learning more." Mark concludes, "I'd say that as many people became religious through Zalman [Lipskier], because they became naturally inquisitive, than through Rabbi Yaakov."

### **Selective Scripturalism**

In addition to the clear manifestations of gendered and feminist scripturalist rhetoric, it is apparent that *tznius*, Shabbat, and *kashrut* are the three orthopraxies that students must choose to either accept or reject in Meor. Regardless of their decision, all students who speak of these three *mitzvot* indicate that they internalized the Orthodox constructs of these terms. By "*tznius*," students refer to modest dress that ideally covers skin on all extremities, the prohibition against women singing in front of men, and *shomer negiyah*, refraining from touching members of the opposite sex. When students mention "keeping Shabbat," they are referring to women lighting candles at sunset on Friday night, men davening at the *shul*, a family dinner with Challah and wine; Shabbat means 24 hours without cell phones, hours, electricity, or cars. By "kosher," students mean food with "glatt" kosher certifications, a stricter interpretation of dietary laws than required by the Jewish text; a kosher home would have separate dishes for milk and meat, and a kosher meal would not have milk products and meat products on the same table. Meor's use of selective scripturalism, which omits alternative, less strict interpretations of written law, is therefore readily apparent in students' adoption of their approach to these *mitzvot*.

Another notable aspect of these “portraits” is that Meor participants who come from weaker Jewish backgrounds use “Judaism” and “Orthodox Judaism” interchangeably after learning through Meor; conversely, the Orthodox students used Meor’s Jewish learning to supplement, and not replace, the approaches to Judaism with which they were familiar. The Orthodox students demonstrated an ability to situate Meor’s Jewish learning among alternative options available for a spiritual seeker. Moreover, because of their Orthodox backgrounds these students observed that the non-Orthodox students were not equipped with sufficient Jewish knowledge to make the same distinctions. The non-Orthodox students were made to believe that by not accepting one teaching, or orthopraxy, they are rejecting the entire Jewish tradition; in contrast, the interpretations of Judaism omitted from Meor’s curriculum are neither mentioned, nor is their absence portrayed as a deviation from true Jewish tradition. By exposing non-observant Jewish students to particular interpretations of textual tradition and omitting or condemning alternative approaches to Judaism, Meor uses “selective scripturalism” to inculcate students with a Jewish identity that is primarily associated with the specific orthopraxies taught in Meor courses. In this way, Meor presents theirs as the “only” way to practice “authentic” Judaism.

## Hierarchical Scripturalism

For the non-Orthodox students, the Meor classes present a two-dimensional Jewish identity: if they choose to implement the orthopraxies taught by *kiruv* educators, they are “more observant”; any departure from the Orthodox approach is treated like a total rejection of “Jewishness.” When students who internalize “selective scripturalism” use the word “Judaism,” they refer to a collection of orthopraxies that are accumulated in stages. In this way, “selective scripturalism”--the orthopraxies delineated by Meor’s measures of success--also operates hierarchically in the Meor programming.

“Hierarchical scripturalism,” which develops Jewish identity in phases that do not threaten students’ comfort zones, is a method that has been acknowledged by *kiruv* professionals in *Klal Perspectives*. Rabbi Koretzky explains that “as a ‘kiruv professional,’ when I avoid nuance,” or omit sections of Jewish tradition, “I do so consciously, intending to communicate a larger truth to a student who is unprepared for fuller treatment so early in his or her development” (Koretzky). Another *kiruv* professional claims that once exposed to Jewish laws by *kiruv* organizations, “Observances follow for each person in their own time, as they come to appreciate how it fits into an inspired life of meaning, direction, and community” (Epstein). Rabbi Lowenbraun, Director of NJOP, discusses “the starting point of what we teach,” saying, “Although...we have a sophisticated audience who can deal with big ideas, they may know nothing of the essentials and fundamentals of our Jewish heritage and practices” (Lowenbraun 25). Other *kiruv* professionals agree that “Torah-based personal growth should be taught first to establish personal relevancy for learning.” (Werth 36).



The reason that the students in each portrait equate orthopraxies with religiosity is because Meor employs “hierarchical scripturalism”: Meor educators delineate particular *mitzvot*--while omitting other behaviors--as necessary stages in the transformation process. Instead of presenting the entirety of Jewish tradition to the neophyte, it is introduced in phasaes in Meor programming, in order to cultivate scripturalist commitments from secular Jewish students in stages.

There is a paradox of hierarchical scripturalism, like feminist scripturalism: since “bringing students close” to Judaism denotes inducing them to incorporate strict applications of orthopraxies, Judaism is confined to a two-dimensional continuum. Students can either “do more” or they can elect to “opt out,” in Rabbi Deutsch’s words, but learning other ways to behave, which constitutes depth of Jewish learning, is not an option for Meor participants. Therefore, the absence of the third dimension of reality is most accute when students refer to “Judaism” as a process of orthopraxies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This has been an ethnographic study of the way *kiruv* functions on Emory's campus. I began with a review of the available literature, and provided an overview of the three Jewish organizations at Emory: Hillel, Chabad, and Meor. When I began this project, I wanted to investigate how my experience with Orthodox Judaism, taught in Meor classes and Israel trips for students, fit into the larger picture of Jewish life at Emory. The university had recently hired an Orthodox rabbi to direct Emory Hillel, and thus during the 2012-2013 school year, the three Jewish organizations that constitute Emory's Jewish life are directed by Orthodox rabbis. I had assumed this would create a homogenous Orthodox landscape for Jewish students looking for involvement in Jewish life. However, my research demonstrated that the Orthodox rabbis of Hillel, Chabad and Meor have distinct goals, methods for their realization, programming, and means of measuring success.

Rabbi Shulkes of Hillel and the Lipskiers of Chabad organize programs in order to enhance the experience of Jewish students at Emory, but their mission is not to modify students' Jewish identity to a singular set of criteria. Meor's revolutionary *kiruv* strategy departs from Hillel and Chabad's "outreach" methods as it attempts to disabuse students of their secular lifestyles and to persuade them to adopt an Orthodox Jewish identity. Meor professionals consider secular American society, which they blame for increasing Jewish assimilation and intermarriage, the greatest threat to the survival of American Judaism; they present Orthodox Judaism as the antidote, and they consider their remedy to have maximal efficacy when students "return" to an "authentic," Orthodox Jewish lifestyle.

The principal way that Meor, under Rabbi Deutsch's leadership, redefines campus *kiruv*, lies in its fastidious measurements of students' progress. Students' "returns" are measured through attention to orthopraxies assumed during Meor programs: for women, these are behaviors primarily associated with their future roles as Jewish wives and mothers; for men, the orthopraxies measured are the *mitzvot* practiced. This results-driven approach has transformed the *kiruv* educators, participants, and the conception of "traditional" and "authentic" Judaism.

"Going by the book," known as "scripturalism," assumes new meaning in Meor programming. In chapters three and four, I demonstrate how the orthopraxies that render the practitioner "more religious" in Meor's records represent narrow and stringent rabbinical interpretations extracted from complex commentary in the Talmud and Torah. As a result, "going by the book" operates through the omission of alternative interpretations found within Jewish textual tradition and requires explication.

In chapter three I discuss the most extreme form of Meor's strategic scriptural omission, "gendered scripturalism," by analyzing the way "modesty" is taught through story-telling. This pedagogical strategy limits textual access to men, while the curricula at Meor's affiliated all-women's seminary are centered around women's gendered obligations. The omission is relatively less severe in "feminist scripturalism," the second teaching strategy analyzed in chapter three: by familiarizing women with Jewish interpretations that appear conducive to female empowerment, Meor omits the other textual laws that may convey the opposite message.

In chapter four, the "five portraits" of participants collectively confirm that particular orthopraxies are conflated with religiosity by Meor educators. "Selective scripturalism," the omission of alternative interpretations of Jewish laws in the Torah and Talmud is evident in

students who internalize restrictive interpretations of comportment. I argue that these constitute what I call “hierarchical scripturalism,” a strategy that links greater numbers of orthopraxies with increased Jewish identification which makes students’ “return” a gradual process and a realizable objective.

Meor has faced criticism for its innovations to *kiruv*, particularly because of the measures of success implemented by Rabbi Deutsch. Jack Wertheimer explains that non-Orthodox *kiruv*’s “creative bookkeeping” of students’ progress has “prompted pushback” from those in the Jewish community who consider Meor outreach “a retail operation.” Meor’s metrics are faulted by those who argue “returning” requires “intensive one-on-one work,” and because “the decision of a non-observant Jew to become Orthodox often results from the combined efforts of many outreach workers in a variety of settings” (“The Outreach Revolution”). Meor’s quantifiers are also criticized for neglecting to record the disproportionately larger number of students who “choose not to go the distance,” according to Wertheimer.

Meor also faces both indirect and direct associations with “brain-washing” from its participants and from some in the Jewish community. In *Klal Perspectives*, Rabbi Buchwald condemns the “all-or-nothing” approach that “non-Chabad outreach demands,” and says that this strategy can yield “results of ‘love-bombing’ and brainwashing” (Buchwald). Buchwald’s observations are echoed in the student responses in Chapter Four, where four out of five student “portraits” referenced notions of “brain-washing” when recounting their experience with Meor. Despite its vehement rejection of a “cultish” image, Meor’s “successful” non-Orthodox recruits have much in common with people under the influence of mind control. The use of monetary stipends and subsidized Israel trips entices Emory students who have either little or no Jewish

background; once enrolled, Meor's use of selective scripturalism causes these students to feel pressured to quickly assume an imagined "ideal" Jewish identity through the orthopraxies delineated in Meor's curricula. Associating Meor with "brain-washing" is particularly damaging to the organization, and there is currently no evidence that justifies such claims.

Given the relatively recent establishment of Meor--both nationally and at Emory University--the strategies of *kiruv* and the effect it has on students has not yet been the focus of scholarly study. The interviews in this thesis may contain information that would be useful for *kiruv* organizations who want to study their impact, for Jewish students studying at a university that has a Meor group, and for scholars of religion interested in novel manifestations of Jewish "tradition" that are affecting large numbers of Jewish youth. The theories of gendered, feminist, selective, and hierarchical scripturalism presented in this thesis are intended to help us understand the methodologies of Meor *kiruv* and to serve as resources that can either be affirmed or redacted in future studies.

This ethnography is an attempt to expose the mechanisms of campus *kiruv* at Emory, but I intend for it to begin a larger conversation about contemporary Orthodox Jewish recruitment on college campuses. Future academic inquiry about *kiruv* at other college campuses would add more nuance to the conclusions I make about *kiruv's* function in Emory University's Jewish life. For example, examining universities with larger or smaller numbers of Jews in their student bodies than Emory may yield results that suggest a different dynamic between *kiruv* professionals and the college students they target. Another potential area of interest for future study would involve analyzing *kiruv* at educational institutions that are located further from ASK, where Meor rabbis are unable to study with Rabbi Deutsch and the founders of the new

*kiruv* movement. In addition to these prospectives for studying campus *kiruv*, the “next step” in *kiruv* research will be to measure the way in which contemporary campus *kiruv* beneficiaries ultimately express their Jewish identities in the periods after they graduate.

If Jack Wertheimer’s calculations are correct, almost one million people are affected by Orthodox Jewish outreach annually (“Outreach Revolution”); similarly, campus *kiruv* is influencing increasing numbers of Jewish college students at Emory University. The experiences documented in my ethnographic fieldwork, and the four categories of scripturalism I articulate, are ways to understand the methodologies of *kiruv*. Whether or not my conclusions about Meor’s methods are corroborated by future academic investigation, they are valuable tools for studying the campus *kiruv* phenomenon that is impacting the next generation of Jewish college graduates in America.

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