

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

THE
FINAL EXAM

Letters to Our Students

Yeshiva University Press
Maggid Books

The Final Exam
Letters to Our Students

First edition, 2023

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

PO Box 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& PO Box 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

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The publication of this book was made possible
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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-59264-623-4

Printed and bound in Turkey

Dedicated in honor of

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman

*Thank you for making Yeshiva University the flagship
Jewish university through your erudition, vision, and
leadership.*

Debbie and Elliot Gibber

*To my wife, Anita,
and our children*

Shlomo

Yehuda

Binyamin

Tamar

and

Yonatan

*whose love and devotion to me, to each other,
and to the great Jewish story
have made all this possible*

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Introduction

My Dear Student,

Over the past few years, I have been traveling from campus to campus, state to state, and country to country learning about the extraordinary reach of Yeshiva University and taking pride in our students, graduates, faculty, staff, and lay leaders.

In my years here, Yeshiva University was invited to represent one branch of the menorah at the Kotel for Israel's national lighting ceremony. Yeshiva University was represented in Dubai at the first ever Holocaust commemoration day in an Arab country. Yeshiva University has hosted global leaders and thinkers at public events on our campuses. On every one of these significant occasions, I came away recognizing that people the world over regard Yeshiva University as the flagship Jewish university.

In fact, at no time in its history has this institution of higher learning been more important or more necessary. In a sea of relativism, cancel culture, and harsh political discourse, our Yeshiva University is holding firmly to tradition in its confrontation with and integration of modernity. תְּדַשׁ יְמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם, “Renew our days

as of old” (*Eicha* 5:21). We take the best of the past, and it informs our present and our future. We grow, learn, and discover. We experiment, innovate, and approach the world with a posture of curiosity *and* with the anchor of our history, rooted in our commitment to Halacha.

In this relatively new century, as an institution that is itself older than a century, we need a current exposition of our educational philosophy and worldview that speaks to the wholeness of each individual student as well as the depth of our multi-millennial tradition.

Ironically, while many beyond our walls recognize what is unique and invaluable in our YU schools and communities, at times our students within them have trouble articulating our distinct outlook. It is instinctively obvious to our Yeshiva University family that we represent an outlook on life that is both timely and timeless, but we ourselves may struggle for the language to define it, to verbalize it, and to communicate it.

This inability can sometimes cause confusion, misunderstanding, and even defection. While for generations there was a sense that YU’s values could be absorbed through osmosis by simply studying a dual curriculum and living on campus, experience has borne out the importance of explicitly spelling out our priorities.

That is what this book aims to do. It demonstrates that our voice matters. And your voice matters.

I chose to tell the story of my journey at Yeshiva University and my desire to express its worldview through the form of letters. Letters communicate ideas in a more intimate and personal way. I began writing letters to students during Covid as a way to keep in touch despite the isolation. Letter-writing as a form of teaching is not new. In 1838, at the age of twenty-eight, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote his influential *Nineteen Letters on Judaism* as a fictional correspondence to a young intellectual who questioned

the relevance of traditional Judaism. In his *Nineteen Letters*, Rabbi Hirsch wrote that the Torah is “noble and sublime” and is able to respond to all modern challenges and developments. It was Rabbi Hirsch who popularized the expression “*Torah im derech eretz*,” which has been translated and understood in a variety of ways, from “Torah with the integration of culture” to “Torah in combination with society’s mores or norms.”

I am, of course, no Rabbi Hirsch. But two centuries later, I humbly offer my own nineteen letters to you, our students, to help you consider how you can maximize these next years of your life, which will be some of the most significant in your own personal development.

Warmly,
Ari Berman

Letter #1

Your Final Exam

My Dear Student,

I hope this letter finds you well.

Indeed, your well-being is the whole reason I am here in the first place.

Allow me to explain.

At the end of our lives, the Talmud teaches us that there is a final exam (Shabbat 31a).

אמר רבא: בשעה שמכניסין אדם לדין, אומרים לו: נשאת ונתת
באמונה? קבעת עתים לתורה? עסקת בפריה ורבייה? צפית
לישועה? פלפלת בחכמה? הבנת דבר מתוך דבר?

Rava said: After departing from this world, when a person is brought to judgment for the life he lived in this world, they say to him:

1. Did you conduct business faithfully?
2. Did you designate times for Torah study?

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3. Did you engage in procreation?
4. Did you anticipate the redemption?
5. Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom?
6. Did you understand one matter from another?

In the fullness of time, we will each stand before God. We will be asked questions about how we spent our time here in this world. Collectively, the answers to these questions express the way in which we lived, worked, loved, studied, and built a better tomorrow. They challenge us and guide us at crossroads in our lives and in our day-to-day decisions. From Rava's perspective, all of our education and years on earth are a preparation for this final exam.

As someone who has devoted years of my life in high school, yeshiva, and university settings, I am only too familiar with final exams. Studying for days and sometime weeks, taking notes and summarizing the material, are all ways I prepare. But imagine if someone gave you the questions ahead of time. You received a brief study guide that laid out with perfect clarity what it was you were expected to answer. And part of that study guide included an easy to remember system to help you keep the core concepts in mind. How valuable would that study guide be to you?

In my mind, our education at Yeshiva University uniquely prepares you – and me – for this final exam, and in that context this book is like a study guide to help you understand the purpose of a YU education.

For the past several years, I have thought deeply about the right language to communicate Yeshiva University's unique approach to education and authentic Jewish living. I walked our halls, spoke with our students, met with parents, trustees, donors, friends, and alumni, conferred with our deans, faculty, and Jewish thought leaders, and worked with our esteemed rabbis, educators, and senior *Roshei Yeshiva*. Based on my own studies at YU and

these conversations, I formulated a shorthand way to frame our education – our five core Torah values – as a vehicle to express and transmit our comprehensive worldview, to help us prepare for this final test in order that we live a life of love, learning, and service.

It is essential that we focus on Rava's questions and our core values at Yeshiva University today.

Our basic priority is clear. We are here in this world to serve God. 'רֵאשִׁית חֵכְמָה יִרְאַת ה', "The beginning of wisdom is to revere God" (*Tehillim* 111:10), and סוּף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמָע אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים, "The end of the matter is to revere God and observe the *mitzvot*" (*Kohelet* 12:14). From beginning to end, our task is to revere God and observe God's commandments. In fact, Rava ends his question list by telling us that the entire purpose of these retrospective questions is to create a life of *yirat Hashem*, reverence for God.

Initially, it seems pretty simple, but from here the questions become more difficult and demanding. What does a life of serving and fearing God look like? What is it that God wants from us? How do we identify that and how do we get there?

On the following pages, I will introduce you to some of the architects and leaders whose guiding principles made YU what it is today, and I will also share a new framework with which to consider a YU education. In my mind, our five core Torah values are not simply a conceptualization of foundational principles of Jewish life; they are a basis on which every student – and every person – can live a life of profound Jewish significance. I have included both Hebrew texts and their translations to address all those in our diverse student body, and I have included sources as an index in the back of the book for those who would like to study and discuss the material more fully. I have presented a theoretical framework with only some applications within our own educational system. I resist the temptation to make all of this practical

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for you, since that is your life's work and mine. Only you can take these core values and apply them to your *unique* life in your *unique* way because no one else can take this final exam for you.

Our worldview and educational philosophy are critical not only for our institution, but for all people who look to tradition as their bedrock of meaning and purpose. As people move both to the left and to the right, seeking either what they perceive as greater progressivism or greater conservatism, more inclusion or less, we have suffered from an attenuated and sometimes impoverished view of what Torah Judaism can contribute to our lives and to the world. I believe our five Torah values speak directly to the context of our times. From the days of the Talmud onward, sages and rabbis, educators and lay leaders have worked to formulate guiding principles for those looking to fulfill the Torah mandate to pursue a life of piety while also studying, working, raising a family, and making contributions to society.

To be clear, there is nothing exceptionally new in this presentation. Nothing about our core Torah values is new at all. That, in fact, is the point. This formulation is primarily a distillation of the thought of our revered teacher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who articulated a worldview that emerges from a deep study and understanding of our Torah texts and rabbinic tradition dating back to Sinai. There is only one Torah and 613 Torah commandments. The five core Torah values help us live lives steeped in the Torah's wisdom while embracing modernity and its challenges through a compelling, multi-valenced prism. The core values honor Torah U-Madda as an educational philosophy while expanding it into a worldview that also embraces truth, dignity, and compassion. They inspire us to integrate these values into a meaningful life of religious integrity that sets as its goal a path to redemption.

Most importantly, as you begin on this path, I offer you the greatest blessing of all: May you feel that Hashem is with you throughout your journey here and beyond. By feeling Hashem's

Letter #1: Your Final Exam

presence, you will never be alone; you will always be loved and always comforted, and you will always walk through life supported and strengthened.

חֲזִקוּ וְאַמְצוּ... כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ הוּא הַהֲלִיךְ עִמָּךְ לֹא יַרְפֶּךָ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבֶךָ.

Be strong and courageous...for the Lord your God goes with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. (*Devarim* 31:6)

Let's study hard for this final exam that earns the most important grade: the fulfillment of our life's purpose.

B'vracha,
Ari Berman

Letter #2

Welcome to Our Family

My Dear Student,

Welcome to our YU family. I am delighted that you are here, and I am committed to helping you prepare for this life test.

Our family is guided by a motto – Torah U-Madda – that appears on our family crest. Torah U-Madda is an educational philosophy that prioritizes Torah while simultaneously recognizing the religious value of worldly wisdom. We combine the best of Torah study and practice with a rigorous academic education to give you a spiritual, intellectual, and professional foundation. But we understand that to integrate these realms well and authentically requires a more comprehensive and holistic approach to your education and to your religious life. After much discussion, I have distilled the prism by which we accomplish our motto and lead lives of meaning, purpose, and service into the five core Torah values. The mere act of studying both domains will not alone enable us to pass Hashem's final exam. Life is larger than any motto could ever be.

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As we begin this journey together, I want to share these values and how they inspire us to formulate our own answers to Rava's questions.

1. **Torat Emet** (Seek Truth): We believe in the pursuit of truth and humanity's ability to discover it. At Yeshiva University, Torah study is part of every day for every student. We can answer Rava confidently that we do make a lot of time for Torah study. In our general studies, we engage in the dialectics of wisdom. With our minds, we plumb the depths of knowledge in the pursuit of truth in every subject to help you become critical thinkers who are able to analyze, synthesize, and integrate your learning into your lives.
2. **Torat Adam** (Discover Your Potential): We believe in the infinite worth of every human being. It's reflected in the way we treat strangers and friends, professors and security guards, those we love and those we struggle to understand. It's the way Hashem created us. Our job is to find the *tzelem*, the Godliness, in everyone. At Yeshiva University, we believe in the importance of healthy relationships and the gift of family life and continuity. Every child is a bet on our future, a symbol of hope in tomorrow. This too is an expression of Torat Adam. It all begins with the dignity and respect we accord every single person.
3. **Torat Chaim** (Live Your Values): We believe in bringing our values to life. Yeshiva University prepares and expects its graduates to behave ethically in life and at work. We make sure, for instance, that all our business students study ethics, with the expectation that they will apply what they know of Jewish law to conduct themselves with the highest moral standards. We try hard to answer to a higher authority.
4. **Torat Chesed** (Act with Compassion): We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others with compassion. Be

kind, and kindness will shape you. Share your heart and your smile with others to alleviate their suffering. You will see examples of a Torat Chesed ethos everywhere and on every campus. You will see it in *chesed* opportunities, in the work of our Student Council, in club activities, and through the work of our extraordinary counseling services. You will feel it through the individualized care of our staff and faculty and through the work of our Office of Student Life. A life of meaning is a life of mercy.

5. **Torat Tzion** (Bring Redemption): We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and to move history forward. Hashem will not ask us, according to Rava, if we *waited* for redemption. He asks each of us if we *anticipated* it: *tzipita le-yeshua*. Anticipation is much stronger than simply waiting. A *tzofeh* in Tanach is a sentinel who is not just sitting back and waiting to see if something happens; rather, he is actively and vigilantly seeking out ways to help. We must play a participatory role in bringing about redemption.

I have seen and experienced these core values all throughout my life as my relationship with Yeshiva University began even before I was born.

My mother, Rosalie Bayer, was a graduate of Stern College. My father, Teddy (Tobias) Berman, was a graduate of Yeshiva College. In fact, they were each elected president of the student body of their respective schools and actually met at an event they planned together to celebrate Rabbi Samuel Belkin's (1911–1976) eighteenth year as Yeshiva University's president.

Throughout my childhood, it was a given that I would attend Yeshiva University's high school and college. I began my days as a student here in high school and studied in YU institutions or affiliated institutions throughout all of my formative years.

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I mentioned this at my investiture speech as president, delivered in the historic Nathan Lamport Auditorium in 2017:

I first stepped into this room when I was thirteen years old as a student of the Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy. Since that moment, I have been inspired and nourished by Yeshiva University. My studies – high school, college, graduate school, ordination, post-ordination, and my early teaching career – all occurred at YU. I even met my wife, Anita, when I was a senior in high school at an MTA-Central event. Intellectually, spiritually, and socially, I am a product of this special institution. Most new presidents of universities need to learn the story of their institutions to understand their narrative and their purpose, but I do not need to read a history book to understand Yeshiva University. It is in my heart, and it is in my soul.

Even my professional pursuits were intertwined with Yeshiva University. After my years in Yeshiva University's *kollelim*, studying under Rabbi Hershel Schachter and then Rabbi Aharon Kahn in the Kollel Elyon, I was selected to serve as a *Ram* (Teacher) in the Stone Beit Midrash Program. At the same time, I began my rabbinic career at one of the leading congregations that has a long and storied association with Yeshiva University – The Jewish Center of Manhattan. I served under my teacher, Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter, for six years, first as his intern, then as Assistant Rabbi, and finally as Associate Rabbi. When Rabbi Schacter moved to Boston, I became the synagogue's Senior Rabbi. I still maintained my classes at Yeshiva University, until the Yeshiva University administration decided that we could better maximize my time with the students if we formed a kollel that would travel to The Jewish Center. In that capacity, I became a *Rosh Kollel* for YU; a group of *semicha*

students came to study daily with me at The Jewish Center, nourishing me and them and keeping me within the YU orbit.

Life was going well. My family integrated well into the Upper West Side community. I believed in my work, I loved my congregation, and I was teaching Torah on a very high level. Intellectually, spiritually, and professionally, my wife, my children, and I were settled and thriving.

At the same time, we were not in Israel.

We live in a generation in which Hashem has blessed us with the return of the Jewish people to our homeland. Israel is once again protected by a Jewish army under Jewish sovereignty. The hand of Hashem in history is obvious to all who have read through Tanach and have a sense of the trials and triumphs of the Jewish national journey. It was difficult for us to imagine that with this historic shift to Jewish autonomy in our own country, we would not try to raise our children in Israel and see how we could participate, in whatever small way, in the great Jewish project of our generation – building the Jewish state.

So Anita and I, with our then four children, took a sabbatical and informed the congregation that there was a very strong chance we would be staying in Israel.

And that's exactly what happened.

I left. I left Yeshiva University. I left our community and all that was deeply familiar. I began a new life. I studied and completed a doctorate in Jewish thought at Hebrew University and began a new career as a professor at Herzog College, sitting on its executive council and launching a new venture for them as director of Heichal Shlomo, the former home of Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

While the teachings and philosophy of Yeshiva University continued to nurture and enrich my life, and I stayed abreast of YU events over the years, it was more part of my past than my future.

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Yet I sit here now at my desk in the president's office of Yeshiva University. What happened? Why am I here? The short answer is that I am here to write these letters to you. Like you, I am preparing for my final exam. But the longer story will unfold throughout the pages of this book. Rabbi Soloveitchik once said that successful educators open a window into their own souls. This story is in part uniquely my story. For some, the places and people who populate my story will be deeply familiar; for others with less familiarity with the YU community, the ideas and values will perhaps be more resonant. My hope is that all will find themselves in their journey. I will do my best to explain, and I invite you to write your own personal story and discover its uniqueness.

Thank you for joining me in this journey.

Warmest regards,
Ari Berman