

February 10, 2011

# Yeshiva Fair Is a Bastion for Jewish Books of the Printed Variety

By JOSEPH BERGER

Those who mourn the metamorphosis of books made of paper into digital versions for e-readers can find some solace by taking a trip to Washington Heights in Manhattan.

There, in a cavernous hall on its campus, [Yeshiva University](#) is holding its annual [seforim sale](#) — its book fair. It offers 150,000 new and incontrovertibly genuine books — printed and bound — of 13,000 titles. They include gilded volumes of Torah and Talmud, novels, cookbooks, biographies, humor collections, self-help guides and children's picture books, all Jewish-themed.

The fair opened on Sunday and ends on Feb. 27; 15,000 people are expected to visit and to spend a total of \$1 million.

The fair, managed by students, has been running for at least 25 of the university's 125 years, but it has mushroomed in recent years and has become a highlight of the New York region's Orthodox calendar — not quite on the level of Passover, but an important period nonetheless.

That is because it has become a must-do social event, where some of the 58,000 Yeshiva alumni, as well as observant students from colleges and high schools in the New York area, know they will bump into one another. And it is where eligible men and women meet up behind the fig leaf that they are there only to browse through the books. Mingling among them are sprinklings from other Jewish subcultures, from insistently secular to Hasidic.

On Sunday, among the skullcap-wearing men prowling the aisles, some with prayer fringes dangling out of their shirts, was Yishai Barkhordari, 23, a graduate of [Yeshiva University](#) now studying counseling psychology at Fordham University. He said he had run into 10 friends.

"Jews buy and read books, especially Jewish books," Mr. Barkhordari said. "So you put a lot of books in one place, you'll get a lot of Jews."

The book fair also draws thousands of visitors to the neighborhood, from which, for a long time, Yeshiva University had remained relatively separate.

Little by little, that has been changing. Yeshiva students like Tzvi Feifel, a 23-year-old senior and the book fair's chief executive, now live among the [neighborhood's Dominican families](#) and other immigrants, not just in the gentrified quarter west of Broadway, but also in the buildings along the avenues to the east and near the university's spine on Amsterdam Avenue between 183rd and 187th Streets.

Wider community events, like the [swearing-in](#) last month of State Senator [Adriano Espaillat](#), are often held in the university's theaters. Two years ago, Rabbi Yosef Kalinsky, an assistant dean, joined Community Board 12 in Washington Heights, and last summer, he helped organize a family picnic for the board's 50 members in Fort Tryon Park. Ebenezer Smith, the board's district manager, said the university was increasingly employing neighborhood residents.

"They understood that they need to have more community presence," Mr. Smith said. "They're not where Columbia University is, which sponsors many things, but little by little they want to get there."

Part of what kept Yeshiva students apart from the greater community for many years was fear of crime, which seemed to be an almost-daily presence in an era of turf wars over drug sales.

Terry D. Novetsky, 52, of Teaneck, N.J., is a 1980 graduate of Yeshiva and a partner at the Manhattan law firm of Kaye Scholer. He recalled that on his first day as a freshman from Michigan, he came across police officers examining a body at 186th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

Sunday, Mr. Novetsky was at the fair to pick up a book about [Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik](#), the fabled philosopher of Orthodox Judaism and the former head of Yeshiva's rabbinical school. Mr. Novetsky brought along his daughter, Tamar, 16, who wanted to find a cookbook for her mother.

"When I lived here, it was a dangerous neighborhood," he said. "Now it's a place where parents feel comfortable sending their children."

In scope, the book fair, run by a hundred or so students from Yeshiva University and its Midtown affiliate, [Stern College for Women](#), dwarfs almost any commercial Jewish bookstore.

Paul Slater, a retired Manhattan physician, came out lugging 15 books in two shopping bags, including a hard-to-find volume on religious themes in the writing of the Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon.

The [People of the Book](#) are buying a wider variety of books. While Orthodox Jews once pored over the same few Hebrew and Aramaic texts to try to understand how to adapt ancient Jewish laws for their own times, publishers these days are putting out works in English that address many of those questions in a more accessible format — not quite in CliffsNotes fashion, but something closer to a handbook.

One of the fair's most popular works, for example, is "The 39 Melochos" (39 Varieties of Forbidden Work), a four-volume boxed doorstopper that explains the laws and specifies the kinds of contemporary activities prohibited on the Sabbath. It includes information on practical matters like the use of wheelchairs, the brushing of wigs and the application of cosmetics.

Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik, the son of Joseph Soloveitchik and an esteemed Yeshiva professor himself, wrote in a 1994 essay that the current generation of modern Orthodox Jews has obtained its knowledge from books that imparted information “in a self-contained, straightforward and accessible format” and “saw no reason why knowledge of the Torah should not equally be available to them in so ready and serviceable a fashion.” Rabbi Soloveitchik was at the fair, but wanted only his essay quoted.

Profits from the fair are earmarked for student organizations as well as for poorer students who need money for food, clothing and tuition. There are also some auxiliary benefits that come with the confluence of so many people.

At last year’s fair, Shira Sragow, 22, who is from Teaneck and a Stern graduate, met Ari Lewis, 23, of Virginia, a Yeshiva graduate, while stacking and setting up books. Last month, they were engaged.