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Shadow Study of Student Talmud High School

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Ohr Yissochor is a Yeshiva high school of approximately one hundred boys occupying a former single-family house set on a four acre wooded property. Number 42 is one of fifty-four schools in the Lakewood Independent District serving 13,000 students funded by the Yeshiva community (Talmudic), independent of the State of New Jersey and the Lakewood School Board. It is an all-boys high school.

The boys typically arrive at school at 7:50 in the morning on Sunday through Friday and stay until 8:30 at night, with the exception of Sunday when they leave at 6:00 and Friday, when they leave shortly after noon. I shadowed a boy named Sam (fictional name), a quiet, studious eleventh grader, over the course of two days.

Sam is sixteen years old, the oldest child in his family. He has eight brothers and two sisters. His father is an air conditioning-heating serviceman-installer.

A school bus picked Sam up at 7:30 am on Sunday, October 22, 2006. Ten minutes after arriving at school at 7:50, Sam and the other boy prayed and heard the reading of the Law in the morning service until 9:15 in a second building behind the school that serves as a study hall. I arrived at Number 42 during the breakfast break at 9:45, shortly after the boys finished a short fifteen-minute class in practical religious law. I sat in the classroom talking with several students about their schedule when Sam walked into the room around 9:55. He and five other students stayed in the class until 10:20 when their Rebbe (teacher) arrived. He gathered the rest of the eleventh grade into the class and began to read from a theological work dating from the tenth century.

Sam was in his seat in the front row and ready for the lesson from the beginning. There are eleven boys in the classroom of about fifteen by fifteen feet. The rebbe walked around the class to make sure that everyone had the right page.

“A human being has intelligence and the faculty of speech. Through speech, he can understand what someone else is thinking and someone else can understand his thoughts.”
At 10:30, I noticed Sam sitting at his desk with his eyes on the Hebrew text. At 10:33, I saw him start folding a small piece of paper. Later, he showed me that it had the notes of a previous class. At 10:34, the rebbe gave the boys an assignment and dismissed them into the study hall to prepare the section of Talmud that they were going to study that day.

We entered the study hall at 10:36. It was in a building with a high ceiling, filled with thin folding tables, housing only the study hall. I sat behind Sam and asked him what we had to study. He said that he did not know since he did was not paying close attention. Apparently, he was concentrating on the notepaper that he was folding at the time.

Most boys had study partners. Learning is usually in a dialectic method, in which two boys study the text and discuss it among themselves. Sam did not have a study partner, nor did another boy who sat down the table from him. He diligently prepared the Talmud for his class. At 11:00, he approached his rebbe who was talking to another student at the center of the hall.

The subject of the text was liability for damages. It speaks of four types of liability as follows: 1) property that causes damage (an ox), 2) someone who leaves a dangerous obstacle (a pit in a road), 3) a person who causes damage, and 4) someone who sets a fire. The center of discussion is the source of each liability. When any of those four types of damages occur, there is some form of negligence in the duty to prevent harm. The problem that was to be dealt with by the class that Sunday was a text that says that all four forms of liability are tied to the responsible party because his property caused the damage. The classical commentators reject the text since the category of a person causing damage is not property and the category of a pit in a road is not one’s property. The question arose over the category of fire. Is that tied to property liability? Who is responsible if someone takes his friend coal (his friend left it burning) and moves it to a place where it catches fire?

Sam points out to his rebbe that fire cannot have anything to do with ownership. His rebbe tells him to wait for the class. At 11:07, Sam asked a question that I did not hear to the boy sitting next to him. At 11:11, he asked me what a certain word meant. At 11:25, he asked me how to understand the text of a commentator that was assigned.
At 11:25, all the boys went back into the classroom. Sam sat in his seat in the front of the classroom with his Talmud open. At 11:25, he whispered something to a student behind him. Another boy was drinking a Pepsi Cola. The rebbe told him to put it away. Then the rebbe asked the class why is there liability if one leaves a rock, knife or package in public way and causes damages, cited in the previous passage of the Talmud. Several boys refer to that passage that says that it is like a pit, that it is 1) something that stands to damage from the beginning of its placement, 2) your money and 3) you have the responsibility to watch it. However, a pit is not your money!

The rebbe proves one particular point. Some of the kids start arguing, but Sam remains quiet. At 11:45, the class was told to open the commentator that Sam asked me about. Sam was a little late and the rebbe had to remind him to open to the page. The rebbe begins to summarize the discussion and the different opinions on the board. While doing so, Sam and the student next to him began doing some kind of motion with his fingers, probably some kind of game. He also started making some kind of funny sound that drew some laughs. In addition, he flicked his mechanical pencil to break off an extended piece of lead.

At 11:55, the rebbe looked at a student who was making a noise with a cellophane wrapper. He was taking some candy. The rebbe just looked at him and he put it away. The boy with the Pepsi got up to take a sip. The rebbe then asked him with typical Talmudic sharpness, “Did you make a second blessing? Because the first time you put it down, I’m sure you didn’t intend to continue drinking and need a new blessing. But if you still intended to drink from it, I told to not to drink from it!” That brought a chuckle.

The setting of the classroom was wonderful. The trees of the wooded property could be seen out the window. The class was highly stimulating, with students actually grasping on a higher level that I experienced teaching math, history, and science.

The class took a break shortly after 12:00 for fifteen minutes. Sam asked the rebbe a question from Friday’s class. He then stayed to finish writing his notes. Sam had notes written all over the text of his Talmud. I followed him down into the basement that served at the school’s lunchroom. I saw him drink a coffee. He told me that he drinks a lot of coffee.
By 12:20, some of the boys returned to the class and the rebbe called the rest back in. They began a class on the Twelve Prophets, covering verses from Joel. I noticed that Sam continued to write notes inside the text. At 12:24, the rebbe ended that short study and returned to the Talmud. Obviously, the Talmud is the staple of the curriculum.

Sam got out of his seat to return his book of the Twelve Prophets to a bookcase. The bookcase is the only place the boys could place any belonging. The rebbe did not have a cabinet or teacher’s desk. None of the classrooms have a desk or file cabinet for teachers.

The rebbe continued. “What if one breaks a fence and causes someone else’s ox to escape and cause damages? We said that the ox creates liability because it’s one’s property.” He explained that we can learn liability in that case from the category of fire.

As the rebbe explains some fairly profound legal principles, Sam is payed attention while playing with his mechanical pencil.

The rebbe then asked, “What if someone buys a campfire that is already lit and it catches other things on fire? It’s his money. Is his ownership without him setting the fire enough to establish liability? Or does the original seller have liability?” The boys argue and shout. The rebbe tries to answer. One boy starts talking before the rebbe finished. The rebbe very calmly quotes a famous saying that says that a wise person does not interrupt. He answers that it comes out that we can have an ox that makes me liable when I do not own it, which we learn from fire, and a fire that does not make me liable, even when I do own it, because I did not light it. Fire has nothing to do with ownership!

The class ends at 1:00. The boys have a one-hour break for lunch. At 2:00, they gather in the study hall for afternoon prayers. From 2:15 until 3:45, they resume their study of Talmud on another topic, but at a much faster pace. I left after the Talmud class and resumed my study on the next day, Monday, at 4:00.

At 4:00, October 23, 2006, I found several boys in their classroom. They told me that Sam was at the Stop and Check convenience store. At 4:05, I saw Sam return to Number 42 with several other boys. The rebbe brought them to the convenience store after their 2:15-3:50 fast pace session as a reward for having a good day in class.

Secular studies begin at 4:10. Sam’s first class is Language Arts. On that Monday, the class studied the short story, “The Use of Force,” by William Carlos Williams in their
literature book. At 4:11, I notice him sitting at his desk with his book in front of him. The teacher discussed the story. At 4:15, he begins to eat a long delicatessen sandwich during class. Apparently, the teacher does not mind. His sat in his seat looking in his book while eating the sandwich. He finished eating by 4:20. The class was answering four Literary Critique questions at the end of the story. Students were assigned the section “Journal Workshop,” in which they are asked if the character in the story acted ethically and other questions. At 4:30, Sam was still sitting at his desk, now drinking a Nestea Brisk. He finally began to write his assignment on paper at 4:36. At 4:44, he began to discuss something with the student behind him.

Language Arts class ended at 4:50 and American History immediately began. The teacher entered while Sam was standing, eating some kind of candy. A classmate had a large bag of candy that he shared with other students and the teacher. At 4:55, he sat down and took notes that the teacher put on the board. There is no textbook. The teacher sat down to discuss the items on the board. Students are responsible for those items on their weekly test. The class was covering the Colonial period, discussing the topics of self-government, freedom of press, public education, and colonial government. When the teacher mentioned that there were property qualifications in order to vote, one student mentioned that it should be like that. The teacher pointed out that although everyone is eligible to vote today, property still has a large influence on politics. He then pointed out that history is not just one event after another event, but recurrent themes. The idea that one must have a stake in society, and the principle that those who have the most to lose should have a fair share in policymaking, presents itself in modern days with campaign finance and lobbying. Those with the most to lose will spend the most to get their message out. He mentioned the Buckley v. Valeo Supreme Court decision, that money is speech. The struggle to end property qualifications is part of the ongoing balance that Americans strike between money and politics.

Sam listened attentively during American history. The class continued until 5:34. The teacher did not hear the 5:30 bell, nor did the next teacher enter the classroom on time. The mathematics teacher showed up at 5:40. The boys had pre-algebra in ninth grade and algebra in tenth grade. Eleventh grade focuses on geometry, normally a tenth grade subject, and trigonometry. The math teacher began by using algebra to make a
geometric proof. He used substitution and the angle addition postulate to prove that two angles are congruent. The teacher went through his proof as the boys watched him at the board. They do not have textbooks in math class either. Instead, they used a handout copy. While the teacher went through his proof, Sam and several other students gathered around the board. They did not stay seated. At 5:50 several boys, including Sam were standing around the teacher as he reviewed his proof at the board. Some boys talked and stopped paying attention. The 6:10 dismissal bell for supper did not ring as normal and the boys left the class. At that time, I concluded my study. The boys have their supper break until 7:10, at which time they gather in the study hall to study Talmud with learning partners. They pray the evening prayers at 8:20 and the bus arrives to take them home at 8:35.

My conclusion from this study is that Sam is a diligent young man who seriously strives to achieve. Although he might be distracted at times, he takes detailed notes and pays close attention to his teachers. Like all boys in the Yeshiva district, he does not have a television at home and does not talk to girls his age. He has no plans to go to college. Sam hopes to continue his Talmudic studies well past high school.