

December 2005

New girls' yeshiva opens in Israel

By **FRANCES KRAFT**
Staff Reporter

When Rabbi Elie Mayer graduated from the Community Hebrew Academy of Toronto (CHAT) in 1993, he spent 11/2 years in Israel before returning to Canada to attend York University.

Of his classmates, fewer than a dozen took part in an Israel program that year.

Last year, however, 41 of 299 graduating CHAT students headed to Israel to participate in one-year programs. About three-quarters of them attended yeshivot, according to CHAT's director of education Paul Shaviv.

Earlier this month, Rabbi Mayer visited his old high school and the Hebrew Academy of Montreal as part of a three-week tour to promote the fledgling women's yeshiva he co-founded earlier this year outside of Jerusalem.

The Tiferet Center for Advanced Torah Studies for Women is located in Ramat Beit Shemesh, 40 minutes from Israel's capital, and has 48 students this year. Most are American or British; two are Torontonians. All have "a significant religious background," he said.

To Rabbi Mayer's surprise, he and Rabbi Azriel Rosner, his co-dean and the school's co-founder, had to turn away more than 150 applicants before Tiferet opened.

"There is no doubt that the idea of a year's study in Israel has become part of the rite of passage of many Jewish school leavers, particularly from the more traditional communities," said Shaviv, a native of England who has been involved in the Jewish education field in Canada since 1994.



Among the trends in post-high school yeshiva education are a growing number of programs for girls and the emergence of “what are known as American yeshivot, which tend to deliver their programs totally in English,” said Shaviv.

Tiferet fits neatly into that profile. Most of its 19 faculty members are olim.

“We realized there weren’t enough girls’ schools [to meet a growing demand],” said Rabbi Mayer.

“I think people have seen the benefits of how [a year in Israel is] an opportunity before you start college to get to know yourself, find out who you are and what’s important to you,” said Rabbi Mayer in an interview while he was in town. “Studying and touring the land is very big in terms of getting perspective on your life, what you want to be and who you are.”

Returning to university is “pretty much a given” at his school. With that in mind, Tiferet offers weekly workshops on “Combating anti-Semitism and anti-Israel propaganda.”

Rabbi Mayer said he and Rabbi Rosner “both felt it was important. Since the intifadah, it’s not just at a few campuses. It’s all over.”

As a student at York in the mid-1990s, Rabbi Mayer – now the father of five children ranging in age from 3 to 8 – quickly honed his own advocacy skills. “I was a political science major. I took [a course called] War and Peace in the Middle East. I had a debate every day with Palestinian or pro-Palestinian students in the class, many of whom were extremely supportive of suicide bombing in Israel. There were Palestinian student groups who would put up maps of the Middle East with no Israel... there was a lot of misinformation and anti-Semitism.

“When you go to a campus... a Jew, whether he likes it or not, represents Israel and needs to know how to respond.”

But the main reason Rabbi Mayer became involved in education and Tiferet was because he wanted to transmit the feeling he gained during his yeshiva experience that Judaism was “exciting and real and relevant.”

Although he came from an observant home – an alumnus of Camp Moshava, he met his wife Melanie at a Bnei Akiva shabbaton when he was 15 – his time at Beit Midrash L'Torah yeshiva “impacted me like no other experience I’ve ever had.”