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Israeli Approach Eyed for U.S. Day School Staff Shortage

Pardes, Hebrew University, Avi Chai Team Up on \$1.6 Million Project

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FORWARD STAFF

JERUSALEM — Hoping to

address a staffing shortage in American Jewish day schools that one principal is calling “a crisis of enormous proportions,” two institutions here are launching an intensive two-year program to train educators.

The Avi Chai Foundation is pumping \$1.6 million over three years into a project proposed by the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, in which 15 new students entering each year will engage in two years of intensive Jewish text study at Pardes and teacher training at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Rothberg School for Overseas Students. The goal of the program is to produce a cadre of teachers to staff Jewish day schools in America — particularly the new, pluralistic community high schools that are cropping up across the country.

With the establishment of eight new non-Orthodox Jewish American high schools in the past five years, and with 11 more set to open within the next three years, day school is becoming an increasingly appealing option for parents hoping to train their children to withstand

the tides of assimilation. Pardes has earned a golden reputation as the yeshiva of choice for 20-somethings who may hold diplomas from elite colleges but have little in the way of Jewish education, and the institute’s effort to channel its resources into teacher training is drawing applause from principals on the hunt. The announcement of the program is also throwing into relief the desperate nature of the search for educators, especially when it comes to finding teachers who are both enthusiastic and knowledgeable, and who come from non-Orthodox as well as Orthodox backgrounds. At the same time, the heavily subsidized program is the latest example of the way in which price cuts are being used to strengthen the appeal of Jewish activities and professions.

“Who’s teaching the Jewish people of the future? People who haven’t learned how to teach or people who haven’t learned Jewish studies in any serious way,” the dean of Pardes, David Bernstein, said, adding, “It’s funny. It’s not just funny, it’s tragic.” The point of the new program is “to raise the level of who’s teaching, particularly in the non-Orthodox high schools,” Mr.

Bernstein said. After earning his doctorate in religious education at New York University and before coming to Israel, Mr. Bernstein spent 11 years at the Ramaz day school in New York. While the newfound interest in day schools among Reform, Conservative and unaffiliated Jews is “a gift,” Mr. Bernstein said, the reality is a “sort of Chelm,” the mythical village of well-meaning fools.

Finding qualified Judaic studies teachers is “the nightmare of a Jewish administrator,” the principal of the New Atlanta Jewish Community High School, Simcha Pearl, said. “The dearth of Jewish educators in the classroom is a crisis of enormous proportions. I don’t know if people fully understand that.” Dr. Pearl — he is both a Jewish educator and a dentist, beckoning jokes about his expertise in “pulling teeth” — is looking to hire two full-time Jewish studies teachers before school starts in the fall. The process is not easy.

One applicant expressed confidence that she could teach a mid-level class in Talmud, but was stumped when Dr. Pearl asked her to explain what Talmud is and the relationship between Talmud and the Torah. “That was pretty

Pardes, Hebrew U. Plan Solution to School Staff Shortage

telling," he said of the applicant. In another interview, Dr. Pearl's mention of "Moshe" and "Yitzhak" — Hebrew for Moses and Isaac — drew blank stares. Given the fact that the applicant currently has a job teaching at a supplementary school, the experience was "a little disheartening," Dr. Pearl said.

Supporters say they hope the hefty stipends that the program provides will lure students who may not have considered pursuing a career in Jewish education. Students will spend four mornings, three afternoons and one evening a week at Pardes, as well as a half a week studying education at Hebrew University. (Currently, future educators can earn a master's degree in Jewish education — without a yeshiva component — through Hebrew University's Melton Center for Jewish Education.) In February, students will return to America to student teach in day schools. The stipend includes two years of tuition at Pardes and at Hebrew University's summer ulpan, or Hebrew-language program, a \$1,000-per-month living stipend and half of the \$6,000 per year tuition at Hebrew University. For the remaining \$6,000 total cost, students can seek a loan from Pardes. So far, Pardes has received 15 applications and another 45 inquiries, and Mr. Bernstein said he receives three or four new inquiries every day.

"The fact that it's going to be very generously subvented for the students, I think, is a great strategy," the author of "If You Build It, Will They Come? Accessibility, Affordability and Participation in Jewish Communal Life," Jonathan Woocher, said. "The psychology of recruitment is certainly helped when you can go to people and say, 'Look, this is a program that folks think is worth investing a million six to get started.'" Mr. Woocher, who is the president of the Jewish

Education Service of North America, said that the shortage of good teachers is "real" and "at every level." He said, "Hardly a day goes by when we don't find ourselves talking to somebody somewhere who's looking for educators."

However, the dean of the Rhea Hirsch School of Education of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Sara Lee, suggested that the future leaders of the Jewish "renaissance" in America might be best trained in America, not in Israel. "The one thing that they won't learn in Israel is: What is the mindset, what is the culture of learning, social and intellectual, from which American day school students come?...That's so important to the teaching process," she said. Ms. Lee said she does not think one month a year in America is sufficient. "I think they'll have trouble making the transition to the actual teaching in Jewish day schools in America, in terms of their understanding of the structure of these day schools. They're inherently an American product. They're shaped by American educational philosophy. They're shaped by the culture of America."

Even so, the teacher shortage is such that there is a need for more institutions, Ms. Lee said, adding, "I think they can make a contribution." Plus, of the nine students graduating from the Rhea Hirsch School this year, three of whom are being ordained as rabbis, only one plans to work at a day school next year. The others are opting for careers in congregational education, which draw a starting salary of between \$55,000 and \$60,000, plus benefits, Ms. Lee said.

The dean of the William Davidson Graduate School of Education at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Aryeh Davidson, said that half of this year's master's program graduates are going into day school education. "The more options, the

more Jewish educators we'll attract," he said. Mr. Davidson said he does not see the Pardes program as competition, because not every future Jewish educator will want to pick up and leave for the Jewish state for at least two years. While the stipends make for "a very good deal," he said, "It's still moving to Israel for two or three years."

Some day school principals desperate for staff who can teach "Hebrew in Hebrew" have already sought job applicants in Israel. The head of school at the Jewish Academy of Metropolitan Detroit, Rabbi Lee Buckman, said he placed advertisements in Israeli newspapers — and received applications from people without college degrees. "If worst came to worst, the head of our Jewish studies department and I, with the head of the Hebrew-language department, could handle all the courses to be taught here," Rabbi Buckman said of the school, which is opening its doors in late August, probably to about 50 students. "As a small school, it's less critical. When we grow, it's going to be very tough."

The chairman of the board of the Avi Chai Foundation, Arthur Fried, said that the Pardes program is one attempt to convert Jewish education into "an elevated profession." He said, "We're blessed with bright people and talented people in the Jewish world. How do you try to motivate them to become part of the world that deals with what I would call a higher calling?" Mr. Fried defended the decision to base the program in Israel. "The needs are so great, the time is so short; that you've got to look at all of the resources in the Jewish world. One of the unique resources is Pardes. Another...is the Rothberg School for Overseas Students. The two of them are created to serve...English-speakers from elsewhere in the world."



PARDES

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