

# Training The Next Generation Of Orthodox Jewish Mental Health Professionals

By N. Aaron Troodler

The issue of mental health in the Orthodox Jewish community is fraught with emotions and complexities and often remains on the periphery. However, the reality is that mental health issues are indeed prevalent within the Orthodox community, just as they are common in other communities.

It is against that backdrop that Rabbi Pesach Lerner established the YIEP (Yeshiva Initiatives Educational Programs – [www.theyiep.com](http://www.theyiep.com)) and developed a program that trains members of the Orthodox community seeking to enter the mental health field. Through a partnership with Bellevue University that began in 2004, YIEP offers undergraduate and graduate programs, including a specialized Master of Science in Clinical Counseling (MSCC). The Bellevue University MSCC is accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), which is the gold standard in the counseling field, and the YIEP cohort is the only mental health program geared for Orthodox students with CACREP's endorsement. YIEP launched the MSCC program in October 2014 and will graduate its second cohort in May 2018, with three more cohorts in process. The next session is scheduled to begin in mid-August 2018 and then January 2019.

The Bellevue University/YIEP Master of Science in Clinical Counseling program is unique because the students are all Orthodox Jews who receive specialized training and engage in specific coursework that prepares them to address mental health issues in the Orthodox community, as well as to serve in the broader Jewish and non-Jewish community.

Modeled after national licensing standards, the MSCC prepares students for the national licensing exam to become a professional mental health counselor. It is a 60 credit-hour online graduate degree program, which includes a practicum and internship component that enables students to gain valuable experience in the field while being guided by a licensed professional. The MSCC coursework centers on the theoretical and applied principles of psychological counseling and trains students to ultimately engage in the as-

essment and treatment of individuals, couples, and families. Students are introduced to critical topics such as assessing and diagnosing mental health issues, psychotherapy, rehabilitation counseling, substance abuse, and prevention services. The MSCC is a regionally accredited graduate degree with an option for students to pursue licensure in their home state.

While the courses offered by the Bellevue University/YIEP MSCC program are online and there is a four-day on-site seminar in Brooklyn, NY where students meet their instructors and classmates, the practicum and internship can be done wherever the student resides. It is also noteworthy that degrees from yeshivas are accepted as fulfillment of the undergraduate degree requirement and tuition is lower than New York area programs because it is based on Nebraska rates, which is home to Bellevue University.

Professor Esther Lustig, LCSW-R, an instructor, professional advisor, and mentor of the YIEP MSCC program, spoke about its distinctive nature. "This is an important and valuable educational program that is transformative for the students and the community alike," she said.

Professor Lustig described a course she developed exclusively for the YIEP MSCC entitled "Orthodox Judaic Theoretical Perspectives."

"The unique piece to the YIEP program is that we have a very specific course that allows students to grapple with some of the major mental health issues that exist in the Orthodox community," she said. "Nothing is off the table; everything is discussed, even the most difficult issues. These are issues that need to be faced and practitioners who want to work in the Orthodox community need to understand them."

One of the hallmarks of the YIEP MSCC is the internship requirement, with which Professor Lustig assists with placement and administration. "There is a strong experiential component to this program; it's not just reading books," she said. "We have students interning at so many interesting places because our program is recognized and we have a good reputation."

Professor Lustig acknowledged the intensive nature of the program, which she considers one of the best in the country. "There are many facets to this program and it gives students a really good foundation to start helping people," she said. "We want to make sure they get the best education possible within the framework they're comfortable with."

Past and current students also spoke enthusiastically about the program. "I am extremely impressed with how professional and helpful the program's faculty members have been," said one student. "They're extremely accommodating and responsive, and look to be as helpful as possible. Although the coursework is intense, I am finding the course to be extremely interesting and hands-on."

"I greatly appreciate the 'sevivah' (the environment), learning these concepts together with others who not only are from Jews, but real B'nei Torah," said another student. "There are many advantages to getting a Master's degree in this manner, as I can study and complete assignments during times I can carve out that are most convenient. In addition, the instructors, who are knowledgeable and committed to explaining the material, encourage the students to reach out to them with inquiries."

"The program is sensitive to the needs of the students and the class calendar fully accommodates the Yomim Tovim schedule," added another student. "I owe Rabbi Lerner a debt of gratitude for his commitment and his concern that the program runs smoothly."

"The YIEP/Bellevue program is educational, professional and respectful, and it's a culturally sensitive program that doesn't compromise a quality education," noted another student.

Dr. Barb Daubenspeck, Ph.D., Program Director and instructor of the Bellevue University MSCC program, explained how the university's Clinical Counseling faculty worked with Rabbi Lerner to establish a cohort that meets the unique needs of the Orthodox community in numerous ways, including structuring the schedules for the cohort around religious holidays and being mindful of the need to facilitate the completion of the program with the

students' already busy schedule. "Course materials are continually reviewed to ensure that even as students are challenged to view things from a new perspective, their cultural values are respected," she said.

"Students complete their coursework moving course by course through the program in step together," added Dr. Daubenspeck. "In this way the students are able to build supportive relationships with one another and are also able to connect with the Bellevue University faculty."

Rabbi Lerner noted that the YIEP MSCC "is probably the most Torah-sensitive program of this nature around."

"Our students receive a serious education," he said. "As all our students are from the Orthodox community, some of whom even participate in the online coursework from Israel, there are no scheduling issues relating to Shabbos or Yom Tov. In addition, the YIEP and Bellevue University provide significant support for our students and play an integral role in helping them secure internships where they get practical experience that helps prepare them for a meaningful career in the mental health field."

Rabbi Lerner remarked that the YIEP attracts all types of Orthodox Jews, including Yeshivish, Chasidish and Modern Orthodox, and that classes are for both males and females, but is very sensitive to the guidelines of Tznius and Halacha. He added that many YIEP students were sent to the program by their Roshei HaYeshivos and community Rebbes, with the hope that they will return to their community to work there as professionals.

"The intersection of Torah values, Jewish ideals, and comprehensive academic training by top professionals and instructors makes the YIEP Master of Science in Clinical Counseling program a unique educational opportunity for Orthodox Jews who want to give back to their community through the provision of quality mental health services," added Rabbi Lerner.

For more information about the program, contact Rabbi Lerner at [THE-YIEP@gmail.com](mailto:THE-YIEP@gmail.com).