

YOF Receives Top Honors in Inter-Yeshiva Poetry Slam

[Excerpted from larger Jewish Press article below](#)

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Modern Orthodox Students Meet to 'Slam' in Poetry Combat

By: Lori Lowenthal Marcus

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It wasn't exactly the Jets and the Sharks meeting for a rumble, but the competing schools had distinctive styles and there were some elements of scrappy street fighting vs. a more refined approach to battle.

On Tuesday, February 19, seven Modern Orthodox high schools from New York, New Jersey and as far south as Philadelphia, met at SAR High School in Riverdale, New York for a Slam Poetry Competition.

Award Recipients at Feb. 19 YU Slam Poetry League Competition at SAR High School

Photo Credit: Lori Lowenthal Marcus

urban music style of rap. The subject matter of Spoken Word is very often personal, dealing with emotional conflict, the generational divides or one's role in the larger world. It began in the mid-1980's and took hold in particular in Chicago, New York City and San Francisco. It has since spread all over the world, but remains an art form that appeals to and draws from a largely young, urban population.

As an experimentalist art form there are few rules: no props, costumes or music, and each piece can be only three minutes long. Spoken Word is performance driven - while the writing is an essential part of the finished product, the delivery - that is, the visual aspect - is critical. Spoken Word competitions - known as slams - take place in rounds with poets competing against each other, and experienced poets as judges.

The Yeshiva University Poetry Slam League had its roots in a poetry journal Mima'amakim, created by several Yeshiva University students including Aaron Roller, a former Rambam Mesivta student, and Hillel Broder, a current SAR teacher.

After Roller and Broder graduated, they decided to create a slam poetry league for the Modern Orthodox schools in the greater New York City environs. It combined elements of traditional slam

Slam Poetry, or "Spoken Word," is a form of oral expression that combines elements of traditional poetry and the

poetry, but with a decidedly Jewish - not comedic shtick Jewish - bent. Roller and Broder joined up with Hillel Goodman, assistant principal of Rambam Mesivta, who was the first coordinator of the Yeshiva League.

Broder, who coordinates the SAR team, told *The Jewish Press* they view the YU Slam Poetry League as a continuation of the Jewish tradition of religious poetry.

"We look to Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, the great Spanish poet of the medieval age, and his schools of poets and poetry," Broder explained to *The Jewish Press*. "We see David HaMelech, the great psalmist, as the progenitor of this project, writing with the knowledge that our religion's essential language of Tehillim is structured in the deep and condensed language of poetic expression."

Broder says he and the SAR administration see this form of artistic expression as "an opportunity for d'veyikut, cleaving to God, developing awareness of the divine."

The League officially began a year and a half ago, with three competitions in the 2010-2011 school year; this year there will be four. Roller, the driving force behind the mima'amakin movement, is now the league coordinator and is always one of the judges.

At the February 19 Poetry Slam, 45 students participated in the first round, with fourteen moving on to the second round.

Roller explained to *The Jewish Press* between rounds that his vision was to create an opportunity for students to have an outlet for artistic expression, as well as a format for non-athletes to interact with students in the other Modern Orthodox schools, similar to what the athletic league provides for athletes.

Because of his own background - Roller is a published poet - he is interested in encouraging the Spoken Word students to learn about different forms of poetry. For each competition the students are required to create both a free verse poem and one that conforms to a particular verse format. Last year, the students had to write a ghazal, a Persian poetry form that Ibn Ezra and others adopted for various slichot. In another competition they had to use the haiku format.

At SAR on Feb. 19, the students competed in two formats, a free verse poem and a "pantoum," a poetic form comprised of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza, and the last line of the poem is often the same as the first line.

The Yeshiva Slam Poetry League students could have come from anywhere - the girls were dressed mostly in black, many with fashionably scuffy boots. The boys - other than wearing kippot - also could have been from any other high school, except that the tzitzit of some were visible, but no one's underwear was.

The content of many of the poems, however, dealt with various aspects of their relationship to God and to Judaism. "Six days a week, we wear a mask," recited Rebecca Rosen, a sophomore from North Shore Hebrew Academy High School in Great Neck, New York. "Help me to understand your ways," implored Mira Schapiro, a junior at The Frisch School, in Paramus, New Jersey.

Some of the high school poets revealed critical questions about their faith. SAR's Yishai Chamudot

called his pantoum "Son of Man," and described our world as a "pathetic excuse for Eden," infused with powerful imagery of "split identity, split sea." And the poem of Shira Levy of Central had a hipster edge. Her poem worked perfectly in the pantoum format, "but you won't because you can't" was a powerful, biting refrain.

Atara Goodman, a senior from Kohelet Yeshiva High School in suburban Philadelphia, received the award for Best Pantoum. She described the oddness of writing poetry on an iPad: "...because paper is how I pray, but the image of paper fades into a pixillated screen..."

"Monotony will certainly be the death of me, breakfast, lunch and dinner, why not dinner first?" asked Kayla Klein of Yeshiva University High School for Girls (also known as Central), whose sharp questions and clever wordplay helped her to advance to the final round of the competition.

In addition to SAR and North Shore, the other area schools that have been competing in the league almost from the beginning, also have a more traditional approach to slamming in that the emotion tended to be more muted, the themes more overtly religious and representational.

The students from most schools read from paper or from their iPhones, as in the case of Moses Bibi, a freshman from Rambam who also advanced to the finals. Goldman proudly told *The Jewish Press* that Bibi is not only a star of the Rambam poetry team, which they call the "Poe Pack," he is also a member of the school choir and is on the hockey team. In fact, most of the Rambam Spoken Word stars are very involved with other school teams, including the college bowl and the mock trial and hockey teams.

The Kohelet Yeshiva High School team were the cowboys - their performance style was much more urban and theatrical than the other competitors. This is because their entree to this art form came directly from the world of Spoken Word, as opposed to being originally grounded in the more traditional styles of poetry or growing out of tehillim.

The Kohelet team's first coach, Cait Hubbard, came from California and had slammed from high school through college. She talked up the art form at the school, found the students wildly enthusiastic, and the club took off.

Hubbard could only find one Spoken Word league in the area, and it was only for public schools in Philadelphia. Problem: Kohelet isn't a public school and it isn't located in Philadelphia. After much wheedling by Hubbard, the Philadelphia Youth Poetry Movement agreed to allow this Orthodox Jewish private school from the suburbs to join them.

As Hubbard explained to *The Jewish Press*, "the Jewish kids looked very different: long skirts and kippot was not something the Philly kids were used to, and the clothing, attitude and the life experiences the city kids slammed about made a huge impression on the Kohelet kids." And despite the difference in backgrounds, when they were slamming, the kids appreciated each others' work based solely on the merits - religion, class and wealth played no role.

But PYPM met on Friday afternoons, and the restrictions the Kohelet administration had to impose, declaring certain topics and language inconsistent with Jewish values - were obstacles that could not be overcome. Rabbi Elchanon Weinbach, the Kohelet Head of School, found out about the Yeshiva League, and Kohelet joined.

The urban influence was obvious in Kohelet junior and team co-captain Celeste Marcus's presentations. She received the award for Best Performance.

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SAR's Zach Smart received the award for Best Free Verse Poem. A line from his poem was not only cleverly worded, but was something to which most in the audience could relate: "going where I need to go in order to get where I want to go, I've quite forgotten where I am."

The Frisch School hosted a slam poetry competition last year, and junior Tamar Palgon was the runner-up for Best Poet in this one. Her voice sounds like an instrument, and the "wake, wake, wake" refrain in her poem had a xylophonic quality.

Roller mentioned between rounds that although what drove him to set up the Yeshiva University Poetry Slam League was to create a social community amongst the modern orthodox high schools, the greatest source of satisfaction has been his realization that there are lots of really talented poets in the Modern Orthodox high school community.

Roller's right - these kids rocked.

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