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## **Mercaz Harav - the flagship of national-religious yeshivas**

By [Yair Sheleg](#), Haaretz Correspondent

The Mercaz Harav rabbinic college is the most prominent yeshiva in the religious Zionist world. It trained the movement's leading rabbis as well as many yeshiva heads, city rabbis, and teachers in religious colleges and high schools. The school was central in shaping the evolution of religious Zionism.

As the flagship of national-religious yeshivas, the religious right is bound to attribute greater symbolic meaning to a terrorist attack here than anywhere else.

Founded in 1924 by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, then chief Ashkenazi rabbi during the British Mandate, it is seen as the first yeshiva to be Zionist in spirit.

Rabbi Kook called it "the central world yeshiva," wishing to set it as a model for a new yeshiva concept, integrating traditional Talmud studies with Jewish philosophy, Bible and even Jewish history, geography and literature. The last three subjects were never actually taught there.

After its founder's death in 1935 it was named Mercaz Harav after him, and became synonymous with Rabbi Kook's teachings.

In its first decades the college had few students and at times it was not clear whether it would survive. The turning point came in the '50s, when graduates of Bnei Akiva religious schools and high-school yeshivas seeking higher religious education flocked to Mercaz Harav, the only Zionist yeshiva.

The prominent Beni Akiva rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria, a student of Rabbi Kook's, encouraged students to go to Mercaz Harav, which was headed from 1952 by Rabbi Abraham Kook's son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, until his death in 1982.

The foundations for the religious settlements in the West Bank were forged in Mercaz Harav, whose student Hanan Porat set out to restore the Jewish settlement in Gush Etzion immediately after the Six-Day War. The founders of Gush Emunim, a religious political movement that encouraged Jewish settlement of land they believe God promised the Jews, came from Mercaz Harav after the Yom Kippur War.

Rabbi Kook encouraged his students to go out and fight for the settlements in the West Bank. He himself took active part in these struggles.

Rabbi Kook was very strict about modest clothes for women and the separation of men and women.

After his death in 1982, his successor Rabbi Avraham Shapira, who also served as chief rabbi, clashed with Kook's favorite student Rabbi Zvi Tau. Tau's people said that Shapira, who came from an ultra-Orthodox background, was wiping out the college's unique theological character and turning it into another run-of-the-mill yeshiva.

The clash led to an official split in 1997, after Shapira introduced to the yeshiva a teachers' training institute, which Tau and his people saw as an "idol in the temple."

Tau and his people left and established the Har Mor rabbinic college, which became quite powerful and dominant. Last year, after Shapira's death, his son Rabbi Yaakov Shapira succeeded him as yeshiva head.

The yeshiva's well-known graduates include Rabbi Haim Druckman, Rabbi Dov Lior, Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, Rabbi Zfania Drori, Rabbi Moshe Levinger, Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Noon and Rabbi Hanan Porat. Other graduates include the Irgun's first commander David Raziell and Maariv newspaper founder Azriel Carlebach.

Today, the yeshiva has about 500 students, including 200 students in the yeshiva's kollel (post-graduate division).