

Review Essay

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History and Nostalgia: The Rise and Fall of the Yavneh Organization

BENNY KRAUT, *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960s* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2011). xxiv+178pp.

In the 1960s, “college kids” changed the world. Some took the “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll” route, changing mainstream American culture profoundly. Some protested the Vietnam War and changed American foreign policy and world history. But others, a small group of Orthodox college students, organized *shabbatonim*, invited prominent rabbis as guest speakers, installed kosher sandwich machines on their campuses, and published pamphlets on the meaning of prayer. They may not have changed the world, but they certainly had a profound impact on at least one segment of North American Orthodox Jewry. These kids—by now, some of the rabbinic, academic, and lay leaders of English-speaking Orthodoxy—created “Yavneh,” an organization of Orthodox Jewish college students. Based on the contents of tens of boxes of old correspondence, files, and archival material which in 1985 Benny Kraut, himself a longtime member and leader of Yavneh, serendipitously rescued from mold and oblivion, *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism*, completed just before the author passed away, tells their story with academic rigor and some touching nostalgia.

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Founded in the winter of 1960 by a group of Orthodox students on college campuses throughout the northeast of the United States, Yavneh gradually spread, establishing branches on campuses from Los Angeles to Boston, before its eventual demise in the early 1980s. Like so many countercultural youth movements, Yavneh was motivated by an intriguing combination of idealism, youthful exuberance, and gutsy optimism, all combined with a desire to meet friends and socialize. Kraut describes a group of young people across the country who wanted to do more than just survive religiously and culturally, but thrive. To survive, there had to be kosher food and the possibility of accommodations when exams fell out on holidays. To thrive meant an intellectually and spiritually sophisticated attempt to learn, listen, speak, teach, and reflect on the meaning of Judaism and its observance in the culture of rapidly changing post-industrial America. Toward those ends, Yavneh students sponsored guest speakers, arranged for kosher food on campus, sent young people to Israel to learn for a year, organized educational *shabbatonim*, negotiated with university presidents about exemptions for *yom tov* celebrations, and published stimulating and accessible works of serious Torah topics.

Yavneh organized around two key principles: first, no Yavneh events should be purely social, but rather should be grounded in an educational and religious message; second, that the organization should maintain its independence and autonomy from the oversight and control of the adult Orthodox establishment. “As college students, they did not want to affiliate with any organization controlled by an adult parent body. Policies, directions, and activities were approved and implemented essentially by students; the students really did run Yavneh” (30). While they never quite lived up 100% to these principles—there were occasional events without learning or teaching, and the organization benefitted at various times from the largesse of the OU and the reluctant cooperation of the Hillel Foundation—these two principles helped to maintain the organization’s seriousness of purpose and sense of religious and intellectual integrity.

This led to a group of young people who took themselves quite seriously, perhaps more seriously than one would think they deserved at the time, given that they were still college students, inexperienced in the complexities of communal interactions. Yet, when Yavneh leadership encountered oppositional university presidents or ambivalent Hillel directors, they negotiated toughly and drove hard bargains. When board members fought about the legitimacy of inviting guest speakers with connections to the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary, they—like board members of more established Jewish organizations—threatened to resign and take their constituencies with them. But, in the process of learning and

staking out their place on campuses, Yavneh members found time to hang out, socialize, and, for many, find their *bashert*. Perhaps because of the seriousness with which they took themselves and their cause, they were able to draft as members of their National Advisory Board some of the biggest names in American orthodoxy, from Rav Mordechai Gifter of the Telshe Yeshiva to Prof. Irving Greenberg of Yeshiva University.

Yavneh set the ground for trends in American Orthodoxy that reached their peaks after Yavneh had ceased to be. Yavneh produced two series of publications, *Yavneh Review* and *Yavneh Studies*, which included, for example, David Derovan's collection of translated primary and secondary sources on prayer, collections of essays on *parashat ha-shavua*, a *Guide to Jewish Life on Campus*, as well as more academic essays on Jewish history and philosophy. Kraut correctly points out that by trying to find publishing venues that would make the Jewish tradition accessible in English, "in concept—though certainly not in religious outlook and ideology— . . . Yavneh articulated in embryonic form the animating spirit and educational philosophy that underlies the extraordinary publishing revolution begun in 1976 by the right-wing Orthodox Artscroll/Mesorah publications enterprise" (82). He notes that the handful of Yavneh members who attended Merkaz Harav and Machon Gold in Jerusalem kicked off the by-now much larger trend of the year-in-Israel programs. And, Kraut emphasizes that the organization set the ground for the numerous large and influential Orthodox Jewish organizations on college campuses throughout the country. Kraut contextualizes Yavneh within the coming-of-age and growing self-confidence of Orthodoxy in the second half of the 20th century, as well as within the vibrant youth subculture of the 1960s. And he rightly points to Yavneh's location within Orthodoxy's developing attempts to separate itself from the Conservative movement, as well as the growing split between the right and left in American Orthodoxy. Debates within Yavneh about the legitimacy of people associated with the Conservative movement echoed debates within the larger Orthodox world about the legitimacy of interdenominational organizations such as the Synagogue Council of America, and Yavneh's only minimally successful attempts to reach out to the developing yeshivah world point to growing distance between the various branches of Orthodoxy.

The attempts to bridge the gap between the right and left in Orthodoxy is the focus of the most intriguing and thought-provoking chapter in Kraut's book, describing a meeting that occurred in 1968, and which is today entirely unthinkable. A handful of student leaders had a personal meeting with some of the leading *rashei yeshivah* of America's nascent

yeshiva world, including Rabbis Moshe Feinstein, Shneur Kotler, Yaakov Ruderman, and Yaakov Weinberg. It is difficult to imagine such a meeting occurring today, now that the yeshivah world has become so confident and self-contained. But, smoothed over by some of Yavneh members' personal and familial contacts, the two groups were able to meet, at least that once. Yavneh leaders hoped to build bridges between the college students and the yeshivah world, to encourage the *rashei yeshivah* to find opportunities for college students to spend some time in yeshivahs and to devote some of their own resources to the improvement of the religious conditions of college students, for example by encouraging people to publish English-language guides to aspects of Halakhah. Unfortunately, little came of this, suggesting that mutual rapprochement between the various camps of Orthodoxy was almost as unlikely then as it seems to be today.

But, it is also tempting to think about Yavneh in terms of larger debates about the narrative and trajectory of Orthodoxy in the second half of the 20th century. One could parse Yavneh as simple evidence for the "shift to the right" narrative. During the years that the yeshivahs and Hasidic communities were showing signs of massive growth (creation of Lakewood kollels, *The Jewish Observer*, increase of single-sex schools, demographic changes in Brooklyn neighborhoods, etc.), the ideologically committed Modern Orthodox community, represented by so much of Yavneh, was bickering with school administrators over sandwich machines. When a group of upstart twenty-somethings spoke to the *rashei yeshivah* about their concerns, the *rashei yeshivah* preferred to spend their resources on more narrow constituencies. And, when Yavneh gradually shrank and died by the early 1980s, the more *haredi* institutions were growing rapidly. One could, however, view things differently. Modern Orthodox young people on the elite campuses throughout the United States had enough self-confidence and gumption to insist that their religious needs be met and that there need be no contradiction between the best secular education America had to offer and serious observance. The same years of growth on the right also witnessed the development in Yavneh of an entire generation of incredibly impressive intellectual, educational, social, lay, and political leaders, people such as Yosef and Rivka Blau, David Berger, Harvey Blitz, Joel Wolowelsky, Gerald Blidstein, Joseph Telushkin, Shnayer Leiman, Heshie Billet, Malcom Hoenlein, Mark Steiner, Dov Zakheim, and many more. While Yavneh itself may not have survived, in part it ceased to be because it became superfluous. Orthodox Jews became a fixture on elite college campuses, establishing for themselves regular classes, *shiurim*, *minyanim*, social events, and Shabbat activities. Kosher

food became readily available, and accommodation for *yom tov* observance was no longer controversial. Yavneh's demise signified not its failure, but its success, its growing redundancy. During the late 20th century, the right was not defeating the left, but the two sides of Orthodoxy were growing simultaneously, were constantly defining themselves through their disagreements with the other.

Kraut ends his careful volume with some thoughtful methodological reflections on writing an academic, disinterested history of the organization to which the author is deeply emotionally attached. "Yavneh . . . certainly was fresh, and as a historian I refuse to let go of that. I have written this story with a sense of wistfulness, with a sense of loss" (p. 166). It is not easy to reflect on both strengths and weaknesses of an organization, its positive aspects and its negative, when you are mourning the loss of the institution and what it represents in your mind. But Kraut does an admirable job of writing both as a disinterested historian and as an individual profoundly moved and shaped by what Yavneh helped create. If only all historians and scholars of Orthodoxy could take that path.

I want to buy a copy of this book for each one of my own students, 18-year-old post-high-school Orthodox Jews on their ways to college campuses. By now, students going to Harvard, Penn, NYU, Maryland, Brandeis, Columbia and Barnard, to say nothing of Yeshiva College and Stern College for Women, take for granted the availability of kosher food, accommodation for *yom tov* celebration, regular Torah classes, JLI couples, and Hillel directors who understand the importance of Orthodox presence on campus. How many of these young people suffer from a poverty of riches, not knowing how good they have it, and the potential complacency—and complacency may be Modern Orthodoxy's most significant failing—that comes with having services and needs met effortlessly. Yavneh thrived because of the urgency and importance of what they felt the need to fight for. One wonders if many of today's students might be better off if they, too, had to fight for what now comes so easily.