

# BOOK REVIEW

## *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960s.*

by BENNY KRAUT.

(Detroit: Hebrew Union College Press, and  
Wayne State University Press: 2011)

Reviewed by  
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Yavneh, the National Religious Jewish Students Association, was the only national Jewish student organization of any consequence for the two decades of its existence (1960—1981) that was completely independent of any parent organization.<sup>1</sup> In this posthumously published book, the late Professor Benny Kraut demonstrates how Yavneh was not merely a super-achieving organization of super-achievers during its first decade, but also served as a laboratory and an incubator for a disproportionate number of future Jewish leaders and educators.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Kraut also demonstrates how the young Yavneh collegiates were so innovative and creative that their initiatives had the effect of laying the groundwork for a breathtaking number of future programs, projects, and publications of mature adult organizations for many decades to come.

At a time when it was not easy to live an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle on most college campuses, even in big cities, Yavneh students created and then lived a dream in which “one could be fully Orthodox, intellectually inquisitive and rigorous, steeped in modern culture, and have fun at the same time.”<sup>3</sup> Young Israel had laid the groundwork in terms of kosher kitchens and meal plans for gastronomic satisfaction, and social events for emotional and romantic satisfaction, but Yavneh went far beyond these important breakthroughs. It is difficult to conceive today how the following programs did not exist, or were certainly not widespread, before Yavneh burst onto the scene, and were created by Yavneh students independently: intensive text-based lectures and courses by and for students not part of official Jewish studies departments on campuses throughout

<sup>1</sup> Though it was generally independent, Yavneh received free office space from the UOJCA and was physically adjacent to it for many of these years, and it received funding and a *shaliach* (agent) from the Jewish Agency, which had agreed that Yavneh was the supervisor of the individual *shaliach*.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism*, especially the first Appendix, plus notes 37—43 at pp. 17 and 18.

<sup>3</sup> *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism*, xiv.

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the country; dissemination of weekly Torah reading analyses; *Shabbatonim* and local, regional, and national conventions with packed programs filled with stimulating, educational, and often entertaining lectures and debates featuring many of the most intellectually accomplished Orthodox rabbis and professors in the country;<sup>4</sup> summer institutes in America evenings; year-in-Israel programs based at the leading religious Zionist yeshiva in the holy land (perhaps the first of its kind), and even a program at a leading women's seminary in Israel; and student-edited publications including *Yavneh Studies* (which published academic papers on Jewish issues by members still in college); *Prayer* (which collected philosophical discussions on *tefilla* and a syllabus for a course on it); *Ve-beveti* (which collected material on new liturgies for Yom ha-Atsmaut and Yom Yerushalayim), *Guide to the Study and Practice of Judaism: A Select List (200+ books)*; *A Guide to Jewish Life on the College Campus*, and the commercially successful, frequently reprinted *Yavneh Shiron* (songbook), which also included a most impressive set of inspirational articles along with a comprehensive assortment of Hebrew songs and *zemirot*.

Kraut demonstrates how Yavneh had a role in planting the seeds for future organizations such as Dirshu and Drisha, and publications such as Yeshiva University's *Torah Umada Journal*, and, most significantly, ArtScroll, which now dominates the field of traditional translations of major and minor Jewish texts and commentaries. It even negotiated with such future literary luminaries of the Yeshiva world such as Rabbi Shimon Eider, known for his popular and widely respected writings on the laws of the Shabbat and other topics. Although most Yavneh speakers and members could best be defined as centrist or modern within the spectrum of Orthodox Judaism, the author demonstrates how the organization uniquely drew from people from the left of the Orthodox spectrum (Rabbi Irving Greenberg was a co-founder and the first Chairperson of the organization's National Advisory Board, whose prominent members are listed in an Appendix) to the right. Yavneh even arranged for a historic meeting, on April 28, 1968, of five Yavneh students together with R. Moshe Feinstein (considered the *Gadol Hador*, the leading traditional rabbi and decisor of his generation), as well as Rabbis Shneur Kotler (of Lakewood), Yaakov Ruderman and Yaakov Weinberg (of the Ner Yisrael Yeshiva in Baltimore). Although most of the initiatives formally proposed at that meeting were not developed within Yavneh, some bore fruit. R. Mordechai Gifter of Telshe actually addressed two official Yavneh events, including one in 1969 at Columbia.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism*, 18-19.

Perhaps not as surprisingly, The Lubavitcher Rebbe met with Yavneh leaders and encouraged them. Notwithstanding this meeting and encouragement, the Rebbe insisted that the relationship had to remain a secret one, according to a letter by Yavneh's first national president, Joel Levine, to R. Menachem Schneerson in 1961 (as reproduced in the book). No evidence was produced that the Rebbe ever reconsidered this requirement of secrecy, despite Levine's request, in his letter to the Rebbe, for Rabbi Schneerson to reconsider his decision and openly recognize Yavneh. It is not clear on what basis this letter was published, whether the Rebbe reconsidered informally or whether his passing justified the publication of this letter, but it is clear from the book that the Rebbe met with Joel Levine and Rivka Teitz Blau of Yavneh in 1960 to discuss programming ideas, before the Lubavitch launched its incredibly successful Youth Movement and Chabad Houses in 1962, such that Yavneh's influence even extended to the Lubavitch movement that continues to transform and elevate the Jewish world around the globe. Rivka Blau also became perhaps the first woman to become a serious candidate for president of an Orthodox Jewish national organization that included men in its ranks. After she became pregnant, her husband, R. Yosef Blau, succeeded her at the top of the slate and was elected to the presidency.

The author clearly differentiates between the first half of the existence of Yavneh, its golden era in the 1960s, and the years that followed, when the percentage of Ivy League students among Yavneh members was lower, and when more of an effort was often made, through *kiruv* in various ways and degrees of subtlety, to share what they had with people less knowledgeable and observant. Kraut sets out the many reasons that accounted for Yavneh's eventual and "inevitable" demise.

By 1981, many of the challenges faced by Yavneh's founders had already been overcome, through developments such as the establishment of kosher meal plans, new policies where fewer campuses required students to pay for unused non-kosher meal plans, newfound cooperation with and availability of facilities of Hillel Houses (with some notable exceptions), acceptance of pluralism and individual rights (a benefit of the Civil Rights demonstrations of the 1960s, and advocacy of feminism, "minority," and gay rights), and the creation of university-sponsored Jewish studies programs on campus. Many of Yavneh's best, brightest, and/or most idealistic members either shifted to the right and went to the yeshiva world, or went to Israel (not for one-year programs but

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permanently on *aliyya*). Many found outlets in other organizations, such as College Youth for Torah, *Mesorah*, SSSJ, *Mizrachi Hatzair*, *Hineni*, and its own offshoots mentioned above. The “explosion” in professional English language publications rendered Yavneh’s publications unnecessary. So, in a way, Yavneh was a victim of its own successes and of the advances in Jewish life in general in the decades since it was established. Yavneh lasted for five college generations, or ten – if one takes into account that the college experience usually lasts for four years, and leadership positions are usually filled by upperclassmen and women – which is quite an achievement.

The book is not just of interest to former members of Yavneh and participants in its events. The fact that this book was published by the Reform Hebrew Union College demonstrates the universality of its message, all the more remarkable considering that the organization almost never sanctioned speakers who were not completely observant of Jewish laws as interpreted by Orthodox standards. The book is inspiring – awe-inspiring – in showing how much a group of students can accomplish for themselves and for posterity, if properly motivated, intellectually endowed, organizationally minded, and creatively advised.

Nevertheless, even a well-constructed book may have some noticeable and notable omissions. Some of the main participants at some of the important meetings with leaders of the yeshiva world, as described in the book, were and remain well known, quite alive, and easily accessible. Yet it appears that they were not consulted, despite cases where this might have been helpful. The book also would have benefited from correcting the misidentification of students in photos, (luckily, most of the group photos did not identify anyone by name). Overall, however, the book is incredibly well-documented, comprehensive, and concise, to the extent this is possible. The author was a member of Yavneh in the 1960s, but lived up to his aim of being objective nevertheless, and inspirational, as well.

Some Yavneh chapters continue to exist independently. The author concludes with a reference to his retrieving the Yavneh model from the dustbin of history. Perhaps at some point, if enough people find out about this book and read it, the book will go into additional printings, and a groundswell of new initiatives will arise to create a new variation or incarnation of Yavneh, perhaps with emphasis on *hasbara*, presenting accurate information about Israel on increasingly anti-Zionist campuses as well as about Jewish values and texts. “In every generation, each person should search for his own Yavneh.”

## *Book Review*

Indeed, I would conclude on a personal note. Unlike the author, who was active in the golden era of Yavneh on which this book focuses, I was President of Yavneh after this golden era of the 1960s. I had realized even then that Yavneh's best years preceded mine, and I realize it even more strongly after having read the book. I have never given up on the hope that, in one form or another, Yavneh will rise again. This book helps keep that dream alive.

