

# Meorot

A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discourse

***The Greening of American Orthodox  
Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960's* by Benny  
Kraut (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College  
Press, 2010)**

Reviewed by Jeffrey S. Gurock

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# ***The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960's* by Benny Kraut (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2010)**

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I remember, when almost twenty years ago, Prof. Benny Kraut, of blessed memory, was interviewed for the post of Dean of Yeshiva College. As long-time head of Jewish Studies at the University of Cincinnati, with many teaching awards, a plethora of publications to his credit, and an alumnus of the college who surely lived an Orthodox life-style, he was an attractive candidate. He also had a noteworthy family connection, valued at the institution, as one of his qualifications. His late father in law, Rabbi Morris Besdin had developed the James Striar School, a branch of the university that was ostensibly designed to bring in less observant, but decidedly committed, Jews into the world of Torah that Yeshiva College proffered.

As I recall the meeting—I was on the search committee—the vetting of Kraut did not go very well. Although Kraut unquestionably was both the gentleman and the intellectual, there was a sadness and even a touch of anger to Kraut's persona and to his understanding of the institution; a stance that perplexed the committee. After reading *The Greening of American Orthodox Judaism: Yavneh in the 1960s*, Kraut's labor of love about the institution of his youth and young adulthood that he was deeply dedicated to, and is no more, I believe I better understand what troubled Kraut as he attempted to articulate his vision for the Yeshiva College he aspired to lead in the 1990s.

At that late date, Kraut was still fighting the good battles that both inspired and roiled his beloved organization, Yavneh—the National

Jewish Religious Students Association. He staunchly remained committed to its vision of what Modern Orthodoxy could become, years after it had ceased to be, in his view, the dominant viewpoint at Yeshiva—or almost anywhere else in the American Orthodox world. And most of the key people who would have actualized his hopes and dreams were not the revered resident eminences at his alma mater.

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His own leadership in Yavneh, both when he attended McGill University in Montreal and subsequently when he transferred to Yeshiva (1966-67), was for Kraut, “a life shaping experience.” There he perceived himself as among “a cadre of extraordinarily talented and accomplished young men and women, university peers of high-minded religious seriousness” who personified the possibility “that one could be fully Orthodox, intellectually inquisitive and rigorously steeped in modern culture and have fun at the same time.” He recalled, with pride, the weekend retreats and conventions, their events held “in front of many hundreds of people” where they explored and hammered out their ideas. And he noted adoringly that at one of these conclaves, he met his future wife, Penny, which added a personal love connection to his admiration for Yavneh.

But Kraut and his confreres, drawn not only from within Yeshiva but from a myriad of top flight secular colleges and universities where Orthodoxy's modern voice had not yet been heard, were out to do more than merely understand themselves and their place within the Torah community and wider-worlds of thought. They were determined to redirect American Orthodoxy's orientation. For him the "greening" metaphor of the 1960s meant that Yavneh's devotees would "epitomize and embody modern orthodoxy's grand possibilities."

Crucially important in helping Yavneh members find their way religiously and intellectually was a heuristic history professor then at Yeshiva, Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, who characterized those whom he inspired as "the first Jewish university generation that produced an intellectually revolutionary atmosphere and orientation of Jewish attitudes and reevaluation of Jewish ideals and values." To the extent that Greenberg, throughout his long, distinguished and controversial career, ever marshaled foot soldiers who campaigned incessantly for large-scale communal adoption of central parts of his highly-nuanced vision of Orthodoxy, these cadres were his people. Fittingly, a portion of

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*The Orthodox Jew has a legitimate mutually-enriching place in the world of secular learning*

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this book first appeared in a jubilee volume for Greenberg, whom Kraut characterized as "the central adult figure in Yavneh's first six years (1960-1966) and whom he revered for having "fundamentally deflected the basic trajectory of my (professional) life."

Given their implicit marching orders, it meant that Yavneh members were determined to "show that the Orthodox Jew has a legitimate mutually-enriching place in the world of secular learning and that one could be an

Orthodox Jew and attend an Ivy League school." No less important, they would band together to diminish the sense of "alienation" or marginality that such observant students felt on these campuses, whether was caused by the limited availability of kosher food or the crisis of exams that were scheduled on the Sabbath and holidays. And there always was a great desire to provide a locus to foster members' continued growth in their own Judaic learning—through *shi'urim*, lectures or *shabbatonim*- even as they fought the good battles on secular campuses. Interestingly, at the very outset of Yavneh's existence, there was some thought that Yeshiva University students were not to be part of their endeavor, since they did not have to confront these issues where they went to school. But soon these students—and perhaps Kraut was the best exemplar—"assumed national leadership positions."

But along with creating their own community of the like-minded and religiously-committed came the question of how separate they wanted to be from other Jewish college students. After all, they perceived themselves as open both to new ideas and to divergent Jewish religious viewpoints and life-styles. And there was a discernible sub-text, within segments of the organization, that they should fulfill a traditional mandate to bring those estranged from or ignorant of the tradition closer to Orthodoxy—albeit with a very soft touch.

Yet, Yavneh leaders often were of several minds over whether spokespeople for Conservative Judaism were welcome to speak and teach them Torah. In the most heated case of Columbia's Yavneh, they were talking about Jewish Theological Seminary professors who were ensconced just up the block from them on Morningside Heights. There also were often frequent contretemps with campus and national Hillel officials over what religious pluralism meant. In asserting that they represented and served all Jewish students in university settings, many Hillel directors, of

decidedly Conservative and Reform orientations, did not look kindly towards accommodating Yavneh's unbridgeable Orthodox needs and restrictions. Meanwhile Yavneh's leaders, who were both Orthodox and decidedly independent-minded individuals, resented Hillel's claims of suzerainty over Jewish campus life.

At the same time, a segment of Yavneh's own heterogeneous leadership sought to gain the approbation of the Orthodox right, reaching out to some renowned Torah sages as a "means of bridging the gulf that presently separates the Jewish college student " who opted for a diversified secular and religious education "from the realm of the 'Ben Torah.'" Reportedly Rabbi Greenberg "was none too pleased at this rightward drift within Yavneh's national office." Kraut's honest and forthright recital of campaigns and conflicting concerns is told chapter by chapter within a well-documented book that relies on the organization's archives—which he "rescued in 1985 from the second floor of the Manhattan Mizrahi building—, interviews and his own personal, admittedly partisan, heartfelt recollections.

To some extent, the saga of "Yavneh sputtering to an end during the 1980-81 academic year" is typical of that of many one-generational youth organizations of that and other times. Kraut recounts in calm, prosaic language such common issues as "the lack of an independent financial base, student continuity and professional executive" as undermining factors. But there was an additional dimension to Yavneh's decline. The next generation of Orthodox college students needed neither the social nor the cultural support their predecessors needed. More painfully for Kraut, many did not want the open type of Orthodoxy Yavneh offered. The good news for the larger Orthodox community was that many universities eventually began to go out of their way to meet the religious needs of these bright students. Concomitantly,

Orthodox youngsters who came to universities after a year or more of intensive study in Israel perceived Yavneh's intellectual offerings to be "far less fulfilling." They were more than happy to continue their more narrowly focused informal Talmudic learning through their own study circles. Moreover, those who wanted "Jewish studies" courses had a multitude of credit-bearing courses available on campus. But Kraut's sad assessment was that the type of American Orthodoxy that he was proud to be part of, and that he prayed would persist and grow, did not flourish beyond the brief shining moment of the 1960s. Rather, to the author's regret, the efflorescent "religious right," with its "assertion of sole religious authority and authenticity," captured the hearts and minds of all too many American Orthodox college students, even those enrolled in the most secular of universities.

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Still proud of Yavneh to the end, Benny Kraut saw the spirit of Yavneh live on, if not as Orthodoxy's majority viewpoint but, in his view, as its most dynamic minority. He perceived continuity through such institutions as *Edab*, which had its own short existence in the 1990s; this journal and Yeshiva's University's *Torah U-Mada Journal*, and implicitly through Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. He was also sure to enumerate his elite of contemporary Orthodox life who still have their say, a "who's who of modern (or centrist or left) Orthodoxy." For himself, Prof. Kraut maintained his own independent spirit to the end of his lamentably short life. Such a free and even defiant disposition is typified by a letter of submission that he sent to Prof. Michael A. Meyer, Chair of the Publications Committee of the Hebrew Union College

Press: “I am sure some Orthodox Jews will not buy the book because of its publisher. That won’t stop me from publishing with you if you accept it, nor should it dissuade the press from promoting the book in as many Orthodox

circles as possible.” It is a credit to his friends, colleagues and associates who deeply loved him, and respected his labors, that this thoughtful book has been brought to light after its author’s tragic passing in 2008.