

Yeshiva in the 60s

By Irving Greenberg

I taught at YC from September 1959 until June 1972. In retrospect, the atmosphere and influence of the 60s shaped the dynamic of those years.

In the 60s, the dominant American White Anglo-Saxon Protestant paradigm was overthrown by the eruption of long-repressed ethnic/religious minorities. I went to Harvard to fulfill the American dream: to get a PhD and become an academic. Most of my Brooklyn College Jewish classmates were assimilating in fulfillment of this dream. Luckily, I was deeply rooted in *Yiddishkeit* by my home — my father's *misnagdishe lomdus* and my mother's elemental piety — and my life-transforming encounter with Bais Yosef-Novardok Mussar Yeshiva, which shifted my undergraduate plans from RIETS/YC to Bais Yosef/Brooklyn College. Still, I was discussing staying on at Harvard with a fellowship in the Center for American History when the incoming Dean of YC, Dr. Isaac Bacon, called and offered a job as assistant professor of History. Acting intuitively, I accepted almost immediately. Although I did not fully realize the implications of the step then, my Jewish impulses — inspired by Bais Yosef's missionary emphasis on spreading *Yiddishkeit* — won out over my *drang nach America*.

Dean Bacon's main pitch was that he had a mandate to invigorate

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Yeshiva's vision of *Torah u-Madda*. The college was weak; the undergraduate concentrations were heavily skewed to sciences and pre-med. A more challenging college experience could deepen the students' religious lives. There would be allies in the attempted transformation. R. Aharon Lichtenstein would come to teach English Literature and Talmud — another important model of *Torah u-Madda*. Charles Liebman was coming from the University of Illinois. Dean Bacon said there would be others. When I arrived, I found R. David Hartman teaching Jewish Studies. He shared many of these ideas and quickly became my *havruta* and soul mate. Yeshiva was the national leader in outreach; the Torah Leadership Seminar was the jewel. R. Moshe Besdin was running the Jewish Studies Program to bring in non-observant Jews.

We newcomers thought we could improve the Yeshiva, not just the College. We gave continuous input to the *roshei yeshiva* and administration, including recommendations to switch all *shi'urim* from Yiddish to English, to pick a more relevant *masekhta* for study, to put less stress on *pilpul* and more on *bekiyut*, to expand RIETS study beyond *Gemara*, to pay the *roshei yeshiva* better, and to give students more personal counseling. Throughout the decade, we — husbands and wives — got together for “salons” to develop our thoughts on Modern Orthodox issues; the meetings were held mostly in the apartments of the Liebmans and the Lichtensteins at 17 Fort George Hill. In short, like the 60s, we were filled with the conviction that we were going to change the world.

In 1959, I became spiritual guide to the founders of Yavneh, a pioneering organization serving Orthodox students on general college campuses, by dealing with the challenges of Torah confronting modernity. I truly believed that the tradition had the capacity to cope with the toughest questions — even in a university's “no holds barred” atmosphere. In the early 1960s, Jacob Birnbaum arrived with his historic call to rescue Soviet Jewry. Most of the *roshei yeshiva* opposed demonstrations, lining up with the Agudah leaders in upholding *shtadlanut*. We, the “Young Turks,” came out strongly for direct action. In the atmosphere of that decade, we won that argument with the *Gedolim*. YC students provided many of the shock troops for SSSJ demonstrations. Of course, contact with the outside world opened many students up even more.

In April 1966, there was a disastrous fire in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Countless books were burned; tens of thousands of volumes were soaked by the water that put out the fire and they were

rotting away. JTS reached out for help. To be rescued, each book had to be opened gently, pages separated, dried, etc. We organized YC students to go to 3080 Broadway and help; they saved thousands of books. The statement of friendship and *areivut* crossing denominational lines was inspiring.

Mitzvah goreret mitzvah; friendships were engendered by the helping hand. In 1969, a group of JTS graduates were key organizers of the student take-over of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations. The demonstrators demanded a turn from the non-sectarian, universalistic agenda of the Federations toward a new priority investment in Jewish education. I and other Yeshiva people were invited to join. That assembly was an important turning point in community policy. The event brought me personally into the world of philanthropy and community leadership. This encounter eventually led to the founding of CLAL, with its agenda of Jewish education for community leaders and dialogue for the sake of religious pluralism and unity.

In 1969, the national anti-war movement called for a demonstration in Washington, D.C. Many YC activists were moderate opponents of the war. Because I was Orthodox and the son of fiercely patriotic immigrants, I — like most YC'ers — avoided the extremism of depicting America as Amerika, an imperialist, abusive power. As the decade wore on, more Yeshiva leaders were recoiling from the radicalizing cultural environment — “make love not war.” They feared that students would be tempted and make the wrong choices. In the face of warnings that we would embarrass religious Jewry as well as undermine personal observance, we decided that Yeshiva students should join in the demonstration. This posed great challenges in terms of Shabbat observance, providing kosher food, etc. After sleeping and staying within walking distance of the Mall site, we participated in the Mobilization Weekend while making Shabbat together. The experience — shared with other young Jews, religious and non-observant alike — turned out to be simultaneously an inspiring religious expression and a morally uplifting form of outreach.

Throughout the decade, I was undergoing a spiritual odyssey — moving not toward withdrawal, if you will, to *haredi* or pre-modern approaches, but toward greater involvement. I wrote then: “Orthodoxy must change its identity from a fundamentalism to a religion, from preserving Judaism to affirming it and its sovereignty in modern culture.” I urged “applying religious values and practices to all areas of secular life.

But this can only be done when Orthodoxy actually works through, in depth, the modern experience..." The view went counter to the growing failure of nerve vis-à-vis modernity in many up-and-coming *lomdim* and Modern Orthodox leaders.

The driving force for my move was an encounter with the Holocaust. In 1961-62, I went to Israel to teach American history as a visiting Fulbright Professor at Tel Aviv University, but soon was immersed completely in study and reading about the catastrophe. The agony of the suffering in the *Shoah* created a personal religious crisis far beyond the conflicts and doubts generated by modernity. I struggled to understand anew the relationship of God, the world, and the Jewish people. Orthodoxy did not have all the answers. My conclusion: all Jews carried the message of God and the Torah (which is why Hitler tried to wipe them out); all Jews were heroic for having decided to go on living as Jews in whatever form they did. I also concluded that I wanted to refocus directly on Jewish studies and work in healing the Jewish people.

YC did not share my feelings. Yeshiva President Samuel Belkin said: "But, Greenberg, we are so proud of your PhD in American history...why would you want to change to Jewish history?" Dean Bacon objected that an un-academic course on the Holocaust would damage the transcripts of our pre-med students. He finally relented and agreed to a course called "Totalitarianism and Ideology in the 20th Century."

Nor did YC share my priorities. Over the years, I discovered that at Yeshiva, salaries were inversely proportional to the Jewishness of the subject. Albert Einstein College of Medicine's salaries were highest in the university; RIETS's were the lowest; YC was the second lowest, etc. Years later, R. Shlomo Riskin gave the best critique of this arrangement. The poverty of Jewish educators constituted *mesirat ha-guf* — which is wrong. Salaries should be raised to dignified levels. Then *roshei yeshiva* should be asked for *mesirat nefesh*, i.e., total devotion to students, wrestling with the challenges of modernity, risking their souls by reaching out to connect to the most alienated and even heretical people. I came to realize that the Yeshiva administration had so prioritized creating a university — higher standing for the American and the modern — that they would not raise salaries among Judaic scholars, not even to keep the best — like R. David Hartman and Dr. Gerald Blidstein, whom we lost.

Modern Orthodoxy's institutional leadership did not measure up to its challenge. Some administrators and *roshei yeshiva* argued that to lighten

the burden of the dual curriculum, college studies should be diluted. Such an approach betrayed YC's outstanding student body. I believed that a shallow college education would weaken Modern Orthodoxy. Not understanding the depth of the questions, students and religious leaders would be satisfied with shallow, cultural backwater answers. In my courses, I tried to apply the same standards for content, sophistication, and readings that I had encountered at Brooklyn College and Harvard — if not higher. The students flourished. Sadly, RIETS and YC were shortchanged. During those years, there was never anyone in charge of RIETS who was qualified to assess religious quality or to scout *ramim* and promote *lomdim* committed to "synthesis." YC did not keep increasing its investment in quality professors either.

YC's glory was the quality of its students. I loved teaching such bright, hard-working, idealistic and highly absorbent students. In every class, there were a disproportionate number of brilliant students who could have been stars in the Ivy League, but who came to Yeshiva because of religious search and commitments. Yeshiva failed its covenant with the students by skimping on salaries and failing to recruit the brightest and the best to teach. Adding to the injury, YC's administrative procedures were often needlessly difficult; they often were enforced in arbitrary, bureaucratic, and tormenting ways.

By 1965, R. David Hartman persuaded a wealthy lay leader to underwrite a week of learning together for a group of scholars. We invited the best Orthodox thinkers we knew and — there being money left over — invited some Conservative and Reform thinkers as well. I came with my burning interest in the *Shoah* and ignited Emil Fackenheim and others. Fackenheim and other Reform rabbis inspired me to go back and look again at Covenant and see how central it is to the Jewish tradition. We formed deep friendships.

Those were heady days. One year Jakob Petuchowski came with a *ger tzedek* — a German Protestant minister, Aaron Schmidt, who had won a scholarship set up for Christian clergy to come to Hebrew Union College. Schmidt actually came to study for conversion. In accordance with Jakob Petuchowski's *shitah*, he was prepared to be a *shomer mitzvot*. However, he was not content to convert as a Reform Jew; he wanted to become a *Klal Yisrael* Jew. We set up a *Beit Din* consisting of an Orthodox, a Conservative and a Reform rabbi — all *shomrei mitzvot* — to do the *gerut*. Afterward, we greeted the *ger* and danced ecstatically together. R.

Aharon Lichtenstein and R. Walter Wurzbarger, who did not sit on the *beit din*, nevertheless, joined in the dancing. People hugged and kissed for joy. While I was somewhat troubled by the fact that none of what was going on at the Canadian Center for Jewish Studies, as it was now called, was being talked about and taught to the YC world, I was so enraptured with the group that I did not complain. Nor did I pay much attention to the beginning of the reaction to the 60s — a drift to the right.

In 1966, I sat in my office for hours talking with a student about my thinking on Modern Orthodox issues. I spoke unguardedly with an open heart because he was a seeker. The student never told me that he was writing up the conversation with intent to publish. Actually, the interview appeared in *The Commentator* without being reviewed or vetted by me. This was highly improper behavior.*

In an environment where I was moving to the “left” and toward affirmation of non-Orthodox as my response to the *Shoah* and Israel while Yeshiva was beginning its drift to the right, the interview burst like a bombshell. Furthermore, I was orienting myself to a *Klal Yisrael* community of Orthodox-Conservative-Reform rabbis, whereas the religious leadership of Yeshiva was still insular and inward-looking. When I saw the headline: “Greenberg Discusses Orthodoxy, YU, Vietnam and Sex,” I knew there would be trouble. All my life I respected the Rambam’s teaching that, even in Torah, revelation is only up to the capacity of people to hear. Therefore, I would have spoken more restrainedly had I known the views were to be published. I believed in what I said, but the printed words went considerably beyond what many people were prepared to hear. In my written response to the furor, I disingenuously tried to soften and minimize the implications of my words — which convinced no one.

The RIETS leadership sought to condemn my views but realized that they personally had little credibility because of the perception that they did not understand or confront modernity as I had. As the uproar grew, I went to see the Rav. We always had a limited but special relationship. He recognized and was pleased by his strong influence on my thinking. He also respected this thought even though many of my controversial views grew out of pushing his insights farther than he was willing to go, at least

* Publication of this article led to a heated exchange in the pages of *The Commentator*. See letters to the editor in *The Commentator* 69:12, Monday, May 16, 2005, pgs. 4-5, and R. Greenberg’s response, page 5, 12. R. Aharon Lichtenstein’s letter and R. Greenberg’s response are printed at the end of this volume.

publicly. R. Soloveitchik heard me out respectfully. He deplored the lack of discussion of these issues at Yeshiva, and then said: "You know, they pressured me to speak out and denounce your views. They pressed me very hard. But I want you to know that no matter what they do, I will never denounce you publicly." I was moved by his words because I knew that the Rav found it hard to take pressure; this silence was his way of giving me *hizuk*. Yet I felt a burning desire to say to him: "Why don't you speak out and make clear how much these controversial views are rooted in yours?" But my courage failed; instead I urged that he speak out more himself on these topics. At that he launched into a jeremiad against his *lomdishe* students. They were only interested in Talmud and *lomdus*; they were tone deaf to matters of spiritual meaning; they did not come or would not listen when he wanted to talk *hashkafah*; that is why he talked about these topics less and less. I wanted to tell him that if he spoke out publicly that he would set the agenda and no one would dare resist. Again I could not get myself to say it. I was relieved by his assurance and feared offending him.

The opposition found the only other person at Yeshiva who had the credibility to "refute" my views: R. Aharon Lichtenstein. Although vigorous debate was a good thing, I was disappointed by R. Lichtenstein's article in *The Commentator*. It served the political purpose — appearing to contradict my views. But that was misleading. Written with R. Lichtenstein's characteristic style — highly complex, with subtle distinctions and abstract boundaries — only highly trained, sophisticated readers (which the Yeshiva students and teachers mostly were not) realized that he actually conceded the essential validity of most of my views. His agreement was concealed by his repeated criticisms of the tone of the interview — the too sweeping or too open nature of my formulations.

In its effect, the article reinforced those who insisted that even discussing these issues was not acceptable. R. Lichtenstein ignored my call for the needed response to the *Shoah* and Israel reborn. Nor did he acknowledge Orthodoxy's need "for self-criticism, self-questioning and exploring." The argument that to work effectively on the intellectual challenges of modernity, "there must be leeway to make statements wide of the mark," he dismissed as "a nice nineteenth century notion...[with] a pleasant liberal ring about it." R. Lichtenstein passed over in silence my plea that "I speak as an impatient lover not an outsider," although he knew there was a lot of delegitimation going on. He rejected the

warning of an unhealthy atmosphere at Yeshiva in which “criticism is identified with rejection” and that “the net hysteria...would foreclose serious consideration of these problems,” blaming the reaction on my language, not on any tendency toward censorship or repression. To this day, I believe that R. Lichtenstein’s tolerances for exploration are so tight that they handicap Modern Orthodoxy’s capacity to deal with issues such as historical-critical studies and feminism. Notwithstanding the above, R. Lichtenstein spoke with respect toward me and I continue to admire his personal model combining *gadlus be-Torah* and Modern Orthodox values and thinking.

For the most part, over the next two decades, discussion of frontier issues was tolerated less and less — and, except for R. Emanuel Rackman, the institutional leadership of Yeshiva and Modern Orthodoxy stood by and let the swing to the right and the silencing of discussion proceed. From Riverdale Jewish Center to CLAL, I became more and more preoccupied with professional tasks. To my great frustration, I had less time even to be present, let alone to defend my views and policy directions. After another year at Yad Vashem from 1974-75 and in the years of CLAL, my views moved to full religious pluralism and toward affirmative theological dialogue with Christianity. The religious right aggressively moved to delegitimize these views and to cut off any chance that I could speak for them at Yeshiva. Again, the moderate leadership, except for R. Rackman, stood by or joined in the process.

In 1970, I made an abortive attempt to create a Center for Jewish Survival that could deal with the needed response to the *Shoah* and Israel and with the growing challenge of freedom and choice. All Jewish groups were needed to accomplish the task, but Riverdale’s lay leaders were hung up on the participation of non-Orthodox. I concluded that one cannot turn an Orthodox shul into an intellectual/theological think tank open to all groups. Although I loved the Riverdale Jewish Center, I was determined to go back to academia, where I would have the time and professional need to write and publish my views. I thought of returning to YC, although I sensed the growing isolation of my views. However, I saw no indication that they would let me teach full time in the field of Jewish Thought and Theology.

Then City College — where I had taught the Holocaust as an adjunct in 1970-72 — offered me a full professorship to start a Department of Jewish Studies. CUNY offered a salary — a standard academic full

professor salary — which so outstripped the YC scale, it even outstripped my RJC salary, that I was stunned. In a flash, I realized the extent of the disrespect for religious teachers/rabbis at YC and my own financial naïveté — a product in part of the false spirituality imparted in most *yeshiva* education that denigrated the material.

I felt conflicted. I realized that I would miss the incredible quality of YC students and their deep involvement in the religious issues that I passionately cared about. Also, despite its failure to cultivate *roshei yeshiva* and *poskim* who would combine *Torah u-Madda* and to recruit outstanding college professor role models, Yeshiva still had the largest concentration of teacher/thinkers and students wrestling with these issues. But nothing in life comes without trade-offs. Academia was the *avi avot* of the confrontation between Torah and modernity; I also hoped for another chance to start the Center for Jewish Survival there. As it turned out, in 1975, CCNY received a bequest that funded CLAL's start-up. I accepted the City College offer. Sadly, my teaching days at Yeshiva were over.