

Chapter 11, the conclusion to Shalom Z. Berger's "Engaging the Ultimate: The Impact of Post-High School Study in Israel" from the book

# Flipping Out?

Myth or Fact: The Impact of the "Year in Israel"

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# Chapter 11

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## *Conclusion*

What does this mean to the American Jewish community?

For one thing, it means that for a good number of Jewish children today, exposure to Jewish thought and study does not end after twelve years of day school education. More and more, children from homes that are committed enough to send them to day school take it for granted that there will be another year—or even two—of heavy-duty Jewish learning. As we have seen, coming at a critical moment in life, this experience has the potential to make a real difference in lifelong decisions made by these young people regarding their continued education, whom they will marry, what their role in the Jewish community will be, and where they will live.

Moreover, the experience has simply become part of the sociological scene in the Jewish community. Popular novels refer to the Israel study as one of those things that young Jewish people do. Tova Mirvis' novel *The Outside World*<sup>51</sup> is clearly aimed at the community whose values it is meant to spotlight, but the coming-of-age story that revolves around the changes that young people undergo as a result of their Israel study and the strains that it puts on their relationships with their parents and family is for general consumption. When, in Faye Kellerman's *Jupiter's Bones*,<sup>52</sup> Decker argues with Rina and her son Sammy about the dangers of studying in "the Gush" because of its location "over the Green Line," advocating instead study in Kerem B'Yavneh or Shaalvim, the expectation is that the reader—even the non-Jewish reader—will have a sense of what is being discussed.

The acceptance of these programs as part-and-parcel of the educational experience for Orthodox Jewish high school graduates has probably played a role in broadening the scope of Israel study, as well. The success

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51 Tova Mirvis, *The Outside World*, New York, Knopf, 2004.

52 Faye Kellerman, *Jupiter's Bones*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1999.

of American Orthodox day schools in retaining its graduates “within the fold” led first to the development of similar types of day schools in the other denominational streams, and more recently to a movement of non-affiliated “community Jewish day schools.” The current trend in Israel is the opening of new, year-long programs, which offer a wider range of options to students—both non-traditional study options within traditional *yeshivot* and non-*yeshiva* options. The development and success of the birthright Israel program, as well as the encouragement offered by the Israeli government to long-term programs in Israel through their support via MASA grants, can certainly be seen as building on the successes of the one-year *yeshiva* programs.

But the real impact of these programs is on the students themselves. Upon their return to American colleges and universities, there is certainly some level of culture shock as the students who have spent one or two years cocooned in an environment very different from that of the campus see their values challenged and compromised.

Some Jewish educators, discussing whether the secular college campus is an appropriate place for a good Jewish girl or boy who has returned from Israel say things like:

“Be aware that you’re going into enemy territory and if you want to come out alive then you need to be on a mission and stay focused. If you succeed then you can come out with lots of medals, hopefully not purple hearts . . .”

“If your goal is staying religious then you’re playing with failure. Your goal needs to be to introduce all Jews to Judaism and make a *Kiddush Hashem* in every thing that you do.”

“Here are three reasons that people stop being religious –

- a. physical/social needs—everyone else is doing it . . .
- b. emotional—issues, low self-esteem, depression
- c. intellectual—heretical ideas and courses.”<sup>53</sup>

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53 Several such discussions have taken place on Lookjed, an online discussion group for Jewish educators, which is a project of the Lookstein Center for Jewish education at Bar-Ilan University.

Even as there are perceived threats to religious commitment of the alumni of *yeshiva* programs in Israel, there are also those who are working to make the college campus more accommodating to the needs of the Israel returnee. Aside from the traditional mainstays of Orthodox Hillel rabbis and Habad houses, the Jewish Learning Initiative (JLI) sends young couples who are Religious Zionists and have, themselves, experienced life on American college campuses, to act as mentors to day school graduates in universities across the United States.<sup>54</sup> Anecdotal evidence points to such grassroots efforts as offering a lifeline to Israel alumni in these settings.

Yeshiva University is not immune to the tensions that are bound to exist between the values of the *beit midrash* and those of a traditional liberal arts education. Recent defection of Israel program alumni from Yeshiva University to other settings perceived by them as more sensitive to a Torah focused lifestyle<sup>55</sup> are certainly one of the catalysts to discussions between the dean of Yeshiva College and the rabbinic faculty about the appropriateness of certain college courses from a religious standpoint.<sup>56</sup> While these frictions have always existed—and such leadership figures as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik seemed at peace with them—it appears that the groundswell of concern shown by the Israel alumni have played a role in bringing these issues to the fore.

But the effects of Israel study are apparent well beyond the walls of the academy. While the almost universal popularity of the year-long Israel experience is relatively recent, more than a generation of students have already gone through this process, and the effects on the Jewish community

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See, for example, the conversation entitled “Yeshiva in Israel after high school” at <http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=5159&t=5159> and the more heated discussion entitled “Preparation for life on the college campus” at <http://www.lookstein.org/lookjed/read.php?f=1&i=2660&t=2660>. All of the quotes are from that discussion.

54 For information on this initiative, see <http://www.jli.co.il>

55 Zev Eleff, “Ten Sha’alvim alumni depart Yeshiva after a year for less academic alternatives,” in *The Commentator*, August 22, 2006, available online at <http://www.yucommentator.com/news/2006/08/22/Features/Ten-Shaalvim.Alumni.Depart.Yeshiva.After.A.Year.For.Less.Academic.Alternatives-2204991.shtml>

56 See Zev Eleff and Eitan Kastner, “Reconciling Institutional Divides: Rosh Kollel and YC Dean Begin Dialogue,” in *The Commentator*, September 11, 2006, available online at <http://www.yucommentator.com/news/2006/09/11/Features/Reconciling.Institutional.Divides-2259824.shtml>

are clear. In many places in America today the demands and expectations of the Jewish community from their day schools have risen—together with a willingness to pay for excellence in Judaic studies alongside general studies. Branches of *Kollel Torah MiTzion*, a movement of in-school *kollelim* that bring faculty and fellows from Israel to learn and teach both in the school and the local synagogues, now exist in communities across the United States and around the world.<sup>57</sup> Every *Bet Knesset* worth its salt arranges for scholars-in-residence throughout the year—oftentimes *Roshei Yeshiva* and *Rabbanim* at the Israeli *yeshivot*—to offer high-level lectures and *shiurim* to their congregants.

Having made these observations, the proverbial question must be asked: is it good for the Jews or bad for the Jews? There is a perceived “slide to the right” that is being discussed more and more in the context of the future direction of American Orthodoxy. The changes that have been observed and commented on range from the superficial garb of young people who are abandoning the knitted *kippah* for a black fedora to punctiliousness in religious ritual and attendance at *daf yomi shiurim*.<sup>58</sup> What role have one-year Israel programs played in this sociological shift? Is such a change a reason for concern?

Probably the first group to express apprehension about the success of Israel programs in bringing students to greater levels of commitment to Jewish learning and ritual were parents, some of whom perceived the changes in their sons and daughters as “flipping out,” i.e., as a rejection of their value system.<sup>59</sup> “Flipping out” manifests itself in a change of outward appearances (including a change of dress and hairstyle), college and professional choices, and a changed attitude toward secular society and culture.

There is no doubt that some superficial changes are evident in outward appearances, and, as we have seen, there are certainly indications of greater concern for some areas of *halachah* that are bound to create tension in the home. Children who return after a year of Israel study who will

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57 For information on the *Kollel MiTzion* project, see <http://www.torahmitzion.org/eng/>

58 See Samuel Heilman, *Sliding to the Right: The Contest for the Future of American Jewish Orthodoxy*, University of California Press, 2006.

59 This terminology was popularized by Blue Fringe, a band made up of students in one-year Israel programs. The lyrics poke fun at the changes that take place among the men and women who attend these programs.

no longer participate in outings to the beach with their families, boys who are reluctant to kiss their aunt who comes to visit, or girls who will not be seen outside the house wearing pants, will certainly raise eyebrows—if not tempers—in many a Modern Orthodox home.

It is interesting to note, however, that with regard to some of the more central issues having to do with life decisions, students' responses in our study do not seem to indicate a major shift in their thinking. As noted above, there is an increase among those students who think it likely that they will spend a year studying in *kollel* (4% saying that it was “very likely” in the pre-test vs. 10% in the post-test); nevertheless, there is virtually no change in the number of students planning a career in the rabinate or in Jewish education.

Similarly, there does not seem to be much change in college choice. When asked “in what college do you intend to study?” the number of students responding with plans to attend YU, a local college, or an Ivy League University remained largely unchanged after a year of study (with YU getting just over half of the students, the local schools about 20% , and the Ivies about a quarter of them), although almost a third indicated that they were now planning to remain in Israel a second year, subsequently returning home for university level study.

Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect that our children will be mirror images of ourselves. In general American society today, it is not unusual for children to move out of their parents' homes post-high school and to expose themselves to experiences that will help mold themselves as individuals—experiences that can take place on the college campus, in foreign sojourns, in volunteer work, at the workplace, or in the military. These encounters often challenge the values and attitudes of the participant who experiences them at a particularly delicate moment in his or her personal development. It is the age of rebellion—obviously not for all young people, but for many of them—providing an opportunity for searching out ways of identifying themselves as individuals, unique and separate from their parents.<sup>60</sup>

But these observations are not limited to parents. One prominent observer of the American Jewish scene describes the Israel programs much as we have in our analysis, writing:

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60 James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: HarperCollins, 1981.

The *yeshiva/midrashah* experience in Israel is extraordinary. Here, where there are no pressures of getting grades—since most students have already been accepted to college—one finds young people who are ready for a change. They are in the period of identity quest and role moratorium. For many of them, this is their first extended period away from their parents. It is spent in what is essentially a total institution, cut off from their parents and everything that is familiar to them. Being in a *yeshiva* is being where the key element of life is sitting side by side with a peer, in a protective environment where the rabbis and religious teachers are the only adult models, where all one has to do is study Torah and absorb the holiness of the place (both the school and the Land of Israel) and where one is told that by doing so one fulfills God's plan.

He argues that following this intensive Israel study, many students choose to remain in Israel where they become *haredim* or right-wing settlers. Furthermore, he claims, “[t]hose who came back home came back ready to transform the Orthodox world into a far more fundamentalist one.”

In concluding he draws a parallel between the *beit midrash* and the *Masjid*, between rabbis and imams, warning, “[i]f one considers what has happened to the rich culture of Islam as it has devolved into Islamist fundamentalism as a model, the Jews who espouse this option would do well to rethink their strategy.”<sup>61</sup>

While the questions posed in our survey dealt with a broad range of issues and did not focus on those of fundamentalism, the collected data presented in this study does not support this thesis. Without question the year in Israel is a powerful experience, an educational event whose intensity is unparalleled in the framework of traditional day school education. Students, away from their parents for an extended period for the first time, assume the values of the *yeshiva*. Do they become more knowledgeable about their Jewish heritage? Do they become more committed to Jewish law and Jewish learning? Do they affirm their commitment to building a Jewish family, and begin to consider the possibility that its place will be in Israel? Do they come to see themselves as critical to the future of the

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61 Samuel Heilman, “Jews and Fundamentalism,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 17:1–2, Spring 2005. Available online at <http://www.jcpa.org/cjc/cjc-heilman-s05.htm>

Jewish people? The answer to all of these questions is an emphatic “yes!” At the same time, few—if any—of these students drop their plans for the future and move to settle the hilltops of the West Bank. In fact, the overwhelming majority continue to express their plans to complete their college educations in America and indicate a continued willingness to come to terms with the world around them.

Concern for the well-being of “non-fundamentalist Modern Orthodoxy” may likely be based primarily on a specific definition of “Modern Orthodoxy.” This is not the place to split hairs about how to define Modern vs. Centrist Orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup> However, we may briefly examine how leading Modern Orthodox thinkers have defined the term, and how today’s Israel alumni are playing a role in fulfilling their vision of this movement.

The question of the appropriate level of acceptance of, and interaction with, the general community is not new. It appears to have become an issue beginning with the Babylonian Diaspora following the destruction of the First Temple.<sup>63</sup> The issue famously came to a head during Second Temple period times, with the war between the assimilating Hellenists and the Hasmonean traditionalists. Our focus, however, is on the contemporary American scene.

In 1976, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin—then a community rabbi at the Lincoln Square synagogue in Manhattan and today rabbi of the community of Efrat and head of Ohr Torah Institute in Israel—set down his vision for Modern Orthodoxy as a vibrant, crucial part of the American Jewish community.<sup>64</sup> He opened by noting a “shift to the right” taking place in

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62 I recall hearing Rav Yerucham Gorelick, upon whom one of the protagonists in Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen* and *The Promise* is based, assuring one of his students that he could discuss the young man’s dating. Speaking Hebrew in his heavy Yiddish accent, Rav Gorelick said, “*Efshar le-saper li. Ani ish moderni!*” (“You can tell me. I am a modern person!”)

63 See the Gemara in TB *Sanhedrin* 39b: “In one verse it is said, After the ordinances of the nations that are round about you, have ye done (Ezekiel 11:12); while in another it is said, After the ordinances of the nations that are round about you, ye have not done (Ezekiel 5:7)—How is this contradiction to be reconciled? As follows: Their good ordinances ye have not copied; their evil ones ye have followed.”

64 Shlomo Riskin, “Where modern Orthodox life is at—and where it is going,” *Jewish Life*, Spring 1976 pp. 27–31. In a sidebar to the article, a comment is included indicating that the article was adapted from a sermon delivered by Rabbi Riskin in Lincoln Square Synagogue, a center and symbol of Modern Orthodoxy in the 1970s.

American Orthodoxy, pointing to an article that appeared in the 1965 issue of the *American Jewish Yearbook* that made this point, and asked what the Modern Orthodox community could do to offer a real contribution to Jewish life in America.<sup>65</sup>

Riskin attributed the move to the right to a number of factors, including a shift in the value system of general society—particularly with regard to sexual mores—that encouraged committed Jews to seek sanctuary in a more “closed-off” community and a lack of passion endemic in the Modern Orthodox community. He concluded by calling on the Modern Orthodox community to respond by “provid[ing] an environment for the commitment to Torah study and Torah living as an absolute,” arguing that “only when we strive to pursue *Kedushah* and *Emunah* in our daily lives, will we produce in American Orthodoxy the fiery commitment which will enable us to endure, and ultimately to prevail.”

More than 20 years later, Rabbi Avi Weiss—Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah—published his view on Modern Orthodoxy. In it he lists a number of central issues that distinguish between Modern Orthodoxy—which Weiss prefers to call “Open Orthodoxy”—and its right-wing co-religionists. He sums up the unique vision of this movement by arguing that “Open Orthodoxy is open to secular studies and views other than those of their rabbis; open to non-Jews and less observant Jews; open to the state of Israel as having religious meaning; open to increased women’s participation; open to contact with the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements; and open to public protest as a means of helping our people.” Now comes the challenge. Weiss argues that “[t]he key to strengthening Open Orthodoxy is the reconciling of more rigid halachic practices, which I believe are positive, with our own ideological agenda.” Weiss readily admits that “it is a tension that is difficult to live with” and that the inability to do so plays a role in the shift to the right. He explains this movement as stemming from the sincere search “for genuine religious expression in prayer, Torah study and halachic observance. Too often, what they see, however, is an Open Orthodoxy that is open ideologically, but compromising in its halachic standards. . . . Hence, the challenge today is for Open

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65 The article in question, entitled “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” was authored by the sociologist Charles Leibman, who was prescient in noting this trend well before it became widely understood.

Orthodox parents and institutions to be ideologically open, while intensely committed to *halakha*.<sup>66</sup>

Rabbis Riskin and Weiss recognize that the future of “modern” or “open” Orthodoxy depends on creating a cadre of learned, thoughtful, passionate young people, who will be committed in a primary way to the traditional values of Torah and *mitzvot* even as they take up the challenge of interacting with the contemporary world in a serious way. While neither of these activist rabbis have been satisfied with a call to action—both have opened educational institutions, Riskin in Israel and Weiss in the United States—in a sense, their calls for nurturing such a group of young people have been answered by the emergence of the one-year Israel programs. As we have seen, these programs have made a significant impact on individual students, on Jewish institutions of higher learning, and ultimately on the American Jewish community at large.<sup>67</sup>

I recently had the opportunity to spend a long weekend with a group of fairly typical Modern Orthodox couples on a trip in Eastern Europe. As many of them had children who were in their high school and college years, the conversation turned to one-year Israel programs. One father told me that he would not let his son consider going to Israel. “I have a good kid. I don’t need him to go to some *yeshiva* where they will tell him that what his ‘old man’ does isn’t good enough. He’ll end up coming back a religious fanatic and will marry a girl who only wears skirts and covers her hair.” Another couple talked quietly—and proudly—about their son’s choice to continue his studies in a “right-wing” *yeshiva* in America after learning in Israel for the year. The most interesting story came from a woman who told me the following:

My son, Moshe, was always a tough kid. I simply do not remember a day growing up that we didn’t have a fight. He argued about everything—what he was going to wear, whether he was going to go out with his friends, what was being served for dinner. If there was nothing to argue about he would pick on his kid sister.

66 Avraham Weiss, “Open Orthodoxy! A modern Orthodox Rabbi’s creed,” *Judaism*, Fall 1997, 46, 4, pp. 409–421.

67 See also Walter Wurtzberger’s presentation on the Rav’s understanding of “modern Orthodoxy” in “Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik as *posek* of Post-modern Orthodoxy,” *Tradition*, Vol. 29, 1994. Haym Soloveitchik’s seminal “Rupture and Reconstruction” in *Tradition*, Vol. 28, No. 4 Summer 1994 also touches on a definition of Orthodoxy—both “modern” and *haredi*—and its development over time.

He went to Israel with one goal in mind—to take a year off and play a lot of tennis. In fact, he chose a *yeshiva* based on its proximity to the tennis courts. In December, around Chanukah time, I had a business trip to Israel, and I called him and suggested that we go out. All of my friends who visit Israel take a whole group of kids out to eat, and I figured that I had to do my share of supporting the local Israeli eateries. When I called to confirm the time and place, Moshe told me that he wasn't bringing any of his friends. That he wanted to talk. I have to tell you—I was frightened. I hadn't had a civil conversation with him . . . ever. What would the two of us do by ourselves?

When we met at the restaurant, it wasn't just that he was wearing a white shirt—his whole demeanor was different. After 15 minutes I said, "What's with you Moshe? What happened?" And he just said, "Ma, I'm in a different place." He changed his college plans and is in the Touro College joint program where he learns in a serious *yeshiva* half-day and goes to college. He has his head screwed on straight. I don't care that he wears a hat now—he's a mensch!"

Ultimately the post-high school choice is a very personal one. The educational institutions to which we send our children will have an impact on them—and ultimately on their children and their communities, on Israel and on the Jewish People. The world is now a fast-moving place and the challenges and choices faced by today's youth are significantly different from those of the last generation. The opportunities are different, as well. As parents and teachers, our task is to help our children successfully face those challenges and create a better reality of future generations of Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora.