

On the Hungarian Yeshiva Movement

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There is no doubt that many scholars working on the transition from traditional to modern Jewish society have greatly benefited from the late Joseph Ben-David's paper on "The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Society in Hungary." My own interest in this paper was particularly concerned with its third section dealing with the rise of Hungarian yeshivot spearheaded by the Pressburg Yeshiva of R. Moshe Sofer. Ben-David very convincingly uncovered and analyzed a situation in which the Hungarian yeshiva movement evolved in almost total isolation from the Jewish community at large and especially from the communal leadership and wealthy elite. The forces at work in the yeshivot identified by Ben-David were the charismatic attraction and impetus emanating from the Hatam Sofer and his disciples, on the one hand, and the ensuing crystallization of a highly devoted and idealistic student body, a "community of scholars," on the other.

I would say without hesitation that with his analysis and conceptualization Ben-David found his place among the select group of pioneering scholars who initiated the long-neglected historical and sociological research into traditional higher Jewish education. The brilliance of his insights has not faded since he first made them public 44 years ago. However, he shares the lot of all pioneers: their work is to some extent overtaken by subsequent research. In the following critical remarks I will concentrate on a few pivotal points, bearing in mind the great debt owed to Ben-David.

In the wake of decades of yeshiva research the present-day reader misses a vital comparative dimension: Ben-David studied the Hungarian yeshiva without so much as a glance at either the differences or the similarities offered by another yeshiva movement which developed concurrently yet quite independently – the Lithuanian yeshiva of the nineteenth century. A comparison of both types can go far in focusing and rectifying certain observations.

Ben-David's concept of the "community of scholars" is very insightful and has been seminal to a number of subsequent studies.¹ Another significant point, already mentioned above, is the yeshiva's seclusion from the community and from the outside world at large. What seems to me questionable is the manner in which Ben-David combines the two phenomena, arguing that "the yeshiva students *saw a need* to create a new and independent social framework... *distancing themselves* from the bourgeois society of the community" (my emphasis). Not a shred of documentation is offered for the suggestion that the isolation of the yeshiva world was a result of the initiative of the student body. For the seclusion of the Lithuanian yeshiva from the community on the initiative of its founders there is ample documentation; it was, in fact, part and parcel of the very concept of the yeshiva as realized by R. Hayim of Volozhin. It was primarily aimed at raising the social standing of the students, an aim which was neither intended nor achieved in Hungary.

Ben-David is right in demanding an explanation for the phenomenon of self-segregation and he proposes to find it in the social structure of the Hatam Sofer's yeshiva. There is certainly much sense in doing so, yet I would attribute this phenomenon in Hungary, and later also in Lithuania, to additional and very powerful causes. In the period of intense struggle when tradition and modernism confronted each other with mutual anxiety often amounting to implacable enmity, the yeshiva was variously characterized as a "beleaguered fortress," a "shelter," a "Noah's Ark" braving the flood.² Essentially, this was true in a double sense; they were places of refuge for young men trying to escape from the menace and temptations of the modern world, and they were strongholds of the law and lore of Torah.

Coming back to the social status of yeshiva students in Hungary there is in my view a considerable measure of idealization in Ben-David's depicting the "holiday begging spree" of the "students" as "an enjoyable experience and not as humiliating mendicancy." The same applies to their alleged preference for "tattered clothes." This would fit the Novaredok students from the early twentieth century (for which there is ample documentation), but not the Hungarian students for whom Ben-David seems to rely exclusively on I.H. Weiss' memoirs. The evidence of the Hungarian students' sufferings, though from a later period, is so abundant³ that it needs more than one or two lines from Weiss to convince us that in his time there prevailed a "youth movement" atmosphere among the students.

It has always struck me as almost inexplicable how this peculiar and odious Hungarian tradition of the "trek" (Ben-David's euphemism for the annual begging tour from village to village, from house to house, in the face of humiliation and exposure to insecurity occasionally amounting to mortal danger) managed to survive until the First World War. It is inconceivable that a practice which in 1900 was branded as inhuman, not only by students but by responsible

members of the community, should have been an “enjoyable experience” 50 years earlier. If, as Ben-David writes, the world of the yeshiva became increasingly estranged from the community – and I have no doubt that was the situation – then indisputable evidence is needed to prove that in mid-century the “trek” was still an amusing holiday exercise.

The students’ begging tours were carried on at the behest of the yeshiva heads who had no other means at their disposal to satisfy the students’ needs. The Hungarian yeshiva heads, unlike their Lithuanian colleagues, all served simultaneously as communal rabbis and were unable to raise funds for their essentially private yeshiva institutions. All attempts to set up a central yeshiva organization in Hungary failed, each yeshiva head had to struggle for himself, while in Lithuania fundraising was one of the essential functions of every yeshiva. This dichotomy, too, is in need of research and analysis, going far beyond Ben-David’s thorough exposition.

Pressburg was the “Volozhin” of Hungary, yet with essential differences. While Volozhin was all change and innovation, Pressburg represented stability and unswerving conservation of tradition and custom. The new Lithuanian yeshivot were led by scholars who were mostly independent from the local community, had no functions within the communal organization and drew their salaries from the yeshiva budget. The Hungarian heads of yeshivot all served as communal rabbis, the yeshiva being only one of their many functions, though often the principal one. Nevertheless, the Hungarian yeshiva was not a communal institution, but rather part of the rabbinate, as it were, a private undertaking of the rabbi. With a growing number of members of the community becoming antagonistic to the yeshiva and the tradition it represented, and with the rabbi unable to engage in fund raising activities, or to employ any administrative personnel (most Hungarian yeshivot had no more than a few dozen students), the maintenance of the yeshiva was a perennial problem. To solve it, the rabbi was compelled to engage the services of his own students, thereby further debasing their public image. That despite these adverse conditions there was hardly a townlet in Hungary with an Orthodox rabbi which did not have a yeshiva was a tribute to the charismatic prestige of the Hatam Sofer and some of his outstanding disciples. The rift between the assimilating moneyed class and the traditionalist elite of scholars left the Hungarian yeshiva without the broad social backing it enjoyed in Lithuania, yet made the rabbis and their young followers all the more determined to hold on to the yeshiva ideal.

NOTES

1. So far as I can see the term "community of young men" was first coined in this context by Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson five years before Ben-David's essay was published, see "Tenu'at ha-Musar be-Lita," *Ha-Kinus ha-Olami le-Mada'e ha-Yahadut* (Summer 1947), I, (Jerusalem, 1952), 449. It was much later taken up by Shaul Stampfer in his dissertation (Jerusalem, 1981), 209, but was apparently deleted from his book *Ha-Yeshiva ha-Lita'it be-Hithavuta*, (Jerusalem, 1995), and by Menahem Friedman, "Haredim Confront the Modern City," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 2 (1986), 78.
2. H.H. Ben-Sasson, *Retzev u-Temura*, (Tel-Aviv, 1984), 276; M.M. Yashar, *He-Hafetz Hayim u-Fo'olo*, (Tel-Aviv' 1958), I, 136; Z. Galili (ed.), *Kera ben ha-Kipot*, (Jerusalem, 1993), 17.
3. The volumes of the Hungarian students' journal *Nit'e Bahurim* speak an eloquent language on this subject.

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