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Let me tell you upfront: I genuinely enjoyed reading Yeshiva Days, Dr. Jonathan Boyarin’s account of the year he spent as a full-time student and observer at Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem (MTJ), a Yeshiva located on New York’s Lower East Side. There, Boyarin explored the traditional study of rabbinic texts. The product is an exploration of the daily rhythm of Torah study, the role of the Rosh Yeshiva, and the position of MTJ within the surrounding community. While the book forms a cohesive story, the picturesque nature of each chapter lends itself to being read in shorter segments. I suspect, however, that you will want to consume all 185 pages in a single sitting.

I must confess that I am not an entirely objective reader. Originally established in the early 1900s, MTJ has played an important role within my family since the late 1930s when my great-grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt”l, first took on its mantle of leadership, followed later by his son, Rabbi Dovid Feinstein z”tl. I do not, however, claim insider information to the institution or its recent leader of blessed memory. While I always admired my great-uncle, our interactions were limited to occasional family celebrations. I hope you will still find value in my reflections, as someone passionate about the study of Torah and Anthropology.

Yeshiva Days: An Overview
A word of advice: do not skip the introduction of Yeshiva Days. Boyarin’s preface is essential for framing your expectations of what this book is and, more importantly, what this book is not. Yeshiva Days is neither a memoir of Boyarin finding his place at MTJ nor an exposé of a ‘secret religious world.’ Rather, it aims to help all readers—both those familiar with the Yeshiva and those encountering the Yeshiva for the first time—gain a greater appreciation for the experience of Torah study.1

The body of Yeshiva Days opens by explaining the factors that led Boyarin to conduct research at MTJ, from its distinctive heritage to the author’s prior experience studying in its halls as an adult. Boyarin then moves on to describe MTJ itself: the layout of the beit midrash (house of learning) and the rhythm and flow of students within it. The narrative follows with an exploration of MTJ’s relationship with the surrounding community and its engagement with politics, both internal and communal. The author then returns in his third chapter to the “Big Room” of the beit midrash and details the fluid pattern of daily Torah study as he tackles complicated rabbinic texts alone, in pairs (chavruta), and in daily class (shiur) with the Rosh Yeshiva. The fourth chapter expands upon the larger role of the Rosh Yeshiva as both the spiritual, intellectual, and moral leader. This is continued in the fifth chapter by investigating the meaning of “learning for its own sake” (lishmah). Boyarin concludes in the sixth chapter by reflecting on his own image within MTJ and briefly ponders in the seventh chapter the unique experience and relationship of time in Torah study and in dreams.

There is much to discuss about Yeshiva Days, but I would like to focus on three areas: the way Boyarin navigates his own identity at MTJ as a student and ethnographer, the unique experience of time in Torah study, and the role of the Rosh Yeshiva.

Student vs. Anthropologist
A brief introduction to ethnographic research may be in order to help readers understand Boyarin’s approach. Ethnography is a qualitative form of research aimed at exploring and interpreting the culture of individual groups and people. The process of conducting an ethnography relies on ‘participant observation’ which “enabl[es] researchers to learn about the activities of people under study in the natural setting through observing and
participating in those activities.” Clifford Geertz, a famous American anthropologist of the twentieth century, describes how these analyses attempt to uncover the multiple webs of meaning of a given behavior. To illustrate this point, Geertz provides an analogy of three people rapidly contracting their right eyelid. The first person has a twitch, the second is winking, and the third is parodying the first. It is the job of the ethnographer to differentiate the three, to understand the ‘why’ behind the action. Early ethnographies were frequently conducted in what was then referred to as ‘primitive societies.’ However, modern researchers have since used this methodology to explore groups in urban settings, digital spaces, and even their own communities. Boyarin joins this wave of researchers by turning his lens on MTJ.

In Yeshiva Days, Boyarin continuously grapples with his dual identity as a researcher and yeshiva student. When conducting ethnographic research, one never fully loses their identity as an ‘outsider.’ However, as a Jewish male interested in Torah study, Boyarin had natural ‘insider’ access to MTJ. In traditional Orthodox Judaism, there is an emphasis on continuous Torah study for Jewish men, and the beit midrash is the common place to study. Boyarin’s learning background may have been different than others in the Yeshiva, but his right to have access to the beit midrash and the Rosh Yeshiva’s classes (shiurim) was never questioned. Boyarin’s dual role complicated the challenge every ethnographer has: how much can a researcher ethnographically disclose about a group that has placed their trust and confidence in him? Boyarin is sensitive to this responsibility, both as a researcher and a student of the yeshiva, to not reveal everything that may be of interest to his audience. In many ways, Boyarin’s struggle to compose this work parallels my own struggle to review it. As a social scientist who studied anthropology, I have had the opportunity to review various ethnographies and conduct one of my own in the course of my graduate studies. However, it has been uniquely challenging to review an ethnographic work whose subject matter and institution are so close to my heart.

Boyarin’s discretion does not only stem from ethical grounds, but from a personal desire to remain a part of the MTJ community. While Boyarin may no longer be learning ‘in kollel’ full time, his continued investment in the learning and the community at MTJ remains ever present. Even in his reflections, Boyarin ponders the true purpose of his studies at MTJ. Was he “working as an anthropologist or fulfilling a traditional male Jew’s dream of engaging in intensive study? Was it possible to do both at the same time?” (3). It is a quandary present throughout the book, and a tension never fully resolved.

Time in Torah Study
In traditional Yeshivot, one continuously reviews that which he has previously learned. The process of unpacking the challenging rabbinic discourses can be exhausting, and Boyarin even sheepishly reveals he occasionally dozed off during shiur. However, dozing off in the beit midrash is not as uncommon as Boyarin might think. Accounts of students and teachers dozing in the beit midrash are peppered throughout the Talmud (e.g. Pesahim 35a to name but one). Studying Talmud on a full-time basis requires significant mental exertion, but everyone has their limits.

Boyarin develops one of the unique characteristics of Torah study: students learn with the understanding that there is no clear end. The goal is simply to study as long as one can since there will always be more to learn, a deeper understanding both textual and spiritual to be gleaned. Any reader experienced with Torah study can recognize this truth. For me, it brought to mind the traditional Hadran prayer at the end of each tractate: “We will return to you, Tractate [X], and you will return to us…” One can never truly ‘master’ or ‘leave behind’ a portion of Talmud. However, the act of Torah study contains infinite potential for growth, allowing one to delve deeper into the text, review, grow, and study again.

Within his fifth chapter, Boyarin also explores how Torah study suspends linear time. This is reflected within the physical layout of the Talmud itself. The Talmud foregos any sense of linearity altogether, juxtaposing texts and commentaries separated by centuries on the same page, making them appear contemporaneous and in dialogue with each other. Boyarin claims that one reason for this dialogue is the ‘haunting sense’ of what has been previously lost. Amoraim, Tannaim, and commentaries alike have attempted to codify and illuminate nuances of oral law that have been lost since the destruction of the Temple—nuances we are still attempting to understand.

Boyarin’s characterization brought to mind Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s (z”tl) famous description of his experience studying and teaching Torah:

> Whenever I start the shiur, the door opens, another old man walks in and sits down… And then more visitors show up. Some of the visitors lived in the eleventh century, some in the twelfth century, some in the thirteenth century, some lived in antiquity… Of course, what do I do? I introduce them to my pupils, and the dialogue commences. The Rambam says
something, the Ra’avad disagrees... A boy jumps up to defend the Rambam against the Ra’avad... And another jumps up with a new idea; the Rashba smiles gently. I try to analyze what the young boy meant; another boy intervenes, we call upon the Rabbenu Tam to express his opinion, and suddenly a symposium of generations comes into existence.

The collapse of linear time in Torah study allows for a ‘symposium of generations’ to commence. However, I would posit that Rabbi Soleveitchik adds a vital addition to Boyarin’s framework. This symposium of generations is not limited to the commentaries of the text but is joined by actors in the present. It is a never-ending dialogue animated by the voices of teachers and students in the beit midrash.

The Rosh Yeshiva
Throughout Boyarin’s work there is a thread of admiration and respect not only for MTJ, but for its moral and intellectual leader, the Rosh Yeshiva. Boyarin, like many, writes about Rabbi Dovid Feinstein’s unique humility and quiet nature. Unlike the Hasidic paradigm of the ‘Rebbe’ who seeks to build a community of devoted followers, Rabbi Feinstein was satisfied to serve his local community as it organically shifted over time. At one point, Boyarin describes to one of his study partners (chavrutas) his shock that one of the greatest Torah scholars would be satisfied teaching in what had then become a small Yeshiva. The student replied that he believed “the Rosh Yeshiva had stayed on the Lower East Side, precisely because he [did not] want to be the object of mass veneration” (123).

While the Yeshiva may be small, it is filled with a unique energy of learning. In his fourth chapter, Boyarin describes how the Rosh Yeshiva encouraged students to first tackle the text on their own without the assistance of commentaries. He also challenged students to fully explore multiple rabbinic interpretations. To an outsider, this amount of creative leeway may appear misplaced for traditional Orthodox Jews, who are bound to follow a specific tradition of interpretation. However, Boyarin posits that the agile learning at MTJ was encouraged because of the Rosh Yeshiva’s conviction that the ultimate halakhah would not change since “the correct halacha for us is what we do” (minhag). The conviction that minhag ultimately determined the practice of a given community allowed for creativity in the process of examining the text without compromising the ultimate outcome. As Boyarin writes:

The assertion of our own autonomous responsibility for judgment at one point can coexist with the assertion of our obligation to submit to a greater authority at others. It may seem contradictory but in fact helps to sustain a community that is intellectually agile and energetic but whose fundamental loyalty to Torah as the word of God and the blueprint for Jewish life remains axiomatic (134).

I cannot help but end this review on a personal note. I am sure the Rosh Yeshiva in all his humility would have been satisfied to be left out of the book entirely. However, I greatly appreciated the way Boyarin brought his presence to life for an audience that exists beyond the world of MTJ or the Agudath Israel. Rabbi Dovid Feinstein zt”l was a truly special man, and it saddens me to think of his empty desk next to that of his father’s.

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1 For the purpose of this review, “Torah study” will specifically refer to the study of traditional rabbinic texts.
4 “The Rav’s Famous Description (from 1974) of How He Experienced the Mesorah as He Gave Shiur as an Old Man.” YUTorah Online. Lecture, 1974.
5 Boyarin further explores the non-linearity of Torah study, including its potential relationship with ‘learning for its own sake’ (lishmah) in chapter five. In the process, Boyarin creates a new framework for understanding ‘progress’ in relation to Torah study.
6 See p. 126.
7 While there is no traditional haskamah (a letter of consent and approval received by a religious authority regarding a newly published text), Boyarin’s introduction describes his process of getting permission from the Rosh Yeshiva to write this book. This is yet another reason to read the preface and introduction of this book.
Decentralization and Centralization: A COVID Tale of the Modern Orthodox Community

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As we begin to finally see the light at the end of the dark tunnel of COVID-19, a lively conversation about the future of synagogues has begun. I am no longer a pulpit rabbi serving in a shul. But I remain a rabbi, and I remain deeply interested in the goings on in the Modern Orthodox community. Therefore, I prefer a different conversation, not one specifically about synagogues, but about communities and rabbis.

To my mind there are two changes that COVID has brought to Modern Orthodox communities, and of necessity to rabbis. These two changes seemingly go in opposite directions; one reflects increased decentralization and communal fracture, the other conversely speaks to greater centralization. When taken together however, these two changes have much to say about future directions for the Modern Orthodox world.

I.

Changes to shuls began long before COVID. Large synagogues have been in decline for some time. Shtiebels with their more energetic and community involved tefillot have been popping up everywhere. Certainly, the mega shul with a Hazzan is a genuine rarity in the early twenty-first century. Those large synagogues that have continued to thrive are effectively many shuls housed in a single building. Often these synagogues have an entire rabbinic staff to cater to the different tastes—such as Yeshivish Beis Medrash style, Hasidic style, Sephardic, young professionals, and youth—of the various groups that happen to be housed together. But even that model may have run its course. COVID has closed the door, possibly long-term, on the American mega shul, even with all its diversity.

One problem for the mega shul is that backyard minyanim seem to be here to stay. Unlike before COVID, the backyard minyan is no longer limited to Friday night and Shabbat minhah prayers. It has emerged as the go to place for all tefillot. Those who out of necessity invested in heated tents to host minyanim in their backyards may be hesitant to return to davening regularly in the big shul. Even a comfortable pew in an aesthetically pleasing synagogue pales in comparison to the comfort and beauty of the great outdoors.

To navigate this new reality, the successful suburban rabbi, more than ever, will have to reach those who do not enter the synagogue portals. In some communities, he may have to move from backyard to backyard, from minyan to minyan and kiddush to kiddush to have a broad impact. He will have to find ways to engage those who even if nominally are members of the congregation, are certainly not regular participants.

Backyard minyanim are a challenge for large suburban shuls. They present less of an obstacle for the urban shul. However, even in urban environments, COVID has accelerated the decentralization of communities. Many may return only seldom to the synagogue. Those who spent large periods of time away from shul may be hesitant to return at all, certainly to the large one they previously attended. In short, rabbis will tend to smaller flocks in the pews. Cavernous sanctuaries are unlikely to once again overflow.

There are various reasons for this. For one, people have become habituated to praying elsewhere. But further, the American synagogue, particularly the urban synagogue, is largely modeled after Mordecai Kaplan’s Jewish Center. Kaplan saw the synagogue as a place for so much more than prayer. Although in most shuls nowadays there is likely no pool and no school, the shul nonetheless remained the center of a community’s social life before COVID. Shabbat morning youth groups entertained and educated the children. The kiddush nourished and entertained (though likely not educated) the parents. Absent youth groups and absent a kiddush, if that’s where we are headed in a post-COVID world, the American shul model barely stands upright and can be expected to do little more than limp. If all that remains is the core of tefillah, it is entirely possible that only the most dedicated will return to their old shul.

In urban centers, the rabbi will need creative methods and new technologies to engage congregants. The pandemic has shown the effectiveness of new technologies in spreading Torah far and wide. Those who already have a connection with their rabbi can continue to do so over Zoom, even if they move out of the community. In fact, as a result of the pandemic, many, particularly in New York City, have left behind the urban life for more suburban areas. However, the personal connection to a rabbi that is so essential to the American rabbinate cannot be replicated over Zoom. With so many not attending shul and seeing and hearing the rabbi live on what once was a weekly basis, connections are an even greater challenge.
To some extent this emerging American rabbi will need to model himself after the Israeli model of the rav ha-

ir or rav ha-shekhunah. In that traditional Israeli model, the rabbi is not limited by the walls of a particular building. I recall spending a Shabbat in Modi’in a decade ago when the current Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Rabbi David Lau, ran from synagogue to synagogue on Shabbat morning. From what I am told, he spoke in eleven different minyanim that Shabbat, inspiring and sharing words of Torah (sometimes the exact same words) in each location. This rabbinic model was characteristic of prewar European communities as well.

I recently learned that when Rav Dovid Lifshitz zt”l, was Rav in Suvalk, he was responsible for all thirty seven shuls in that town. A Rav was the Rav of a town. There may have been a large shul that served as his base, but his orbit extended to the entire community.

The American model of a rabbi for every shul is historically novel. However, it serves a tremendous need. The ideal American congregational rabbi is far more than a teacher and preacher. He is a life guide and lifelong mentor for his flock. He offers pastoral counseling and is deeply involved in the life of his congregants. He is an essential part of their joys and their sadnesses. The ideal rabbi becomes one of the family. The Israeli rav ha-
der and the European communal rabbi was never expected to know the local congregants personally or be intimately familiar with their needs. He was a resource to whom one could ask halakhic questions when they arose and he represented the community in official functions. He rarely if ever offered pastoral counseling and certainly did not attend every simhah.

The question to ask is how can the essential personalized pastoral role of the American rabbi persist in a decentralized world of backyard minyanim and shhtiebels? How can the successes of a century of American congregational rabbis be maintained if many of the changes wrought by the pandemic remain in the post-pandemic world?

II.

And yet, at the same time that we are encountering so much decentralization we are witnessing greater centralization than at any time in recent memory. For a long time, Modern Orthodox communities operated in pods. Each community rabbi operated independently and decided for his community. Often the rabbi would seek guidance from his rabbinic mentor; more often he would not. But on the whole, each synagogue was an island unto itself. Lack of centralization dominated. The pandemic has brought forth a degree of centralization that has for too long been lacking or perhaps never before attained in Modern Orthodox communities.

Shortly before the pandemic, a large WhatsApp group for American rabbis was started. As if by fate, when the pandemic hit, this group proved immensely valuable for rabbis as they navigated the unchartered waters of COVID. At first discussions focused on whether to close synagogues. Soon the conversation centered around how to arrange for the sale of hametz in a world of social distancing. Questions related to using technology on Yom Tov to avoid pandemic induced isolation at the Pesah Seder came next. Later the conversation segued into specific questions related to prayer in isolation and socially distant backyard minyanim.

Questions of ensuring safe mikveh use and the proper way to conduct a wedding with the minimal number of people attending and maintaining appropriate safety methods followed. Rabbis discussed how to get the body of one who died to Israel and how to properly do the taharah process for the body. Rabbis not only shared halakhot, but more importantly they shared best practices. They listened to what was tried, what worked, and what failed. A spirit of collegiality emerged.

For rabbis this was exceedingly important. Rabbis are very often overworked (as well as underappreciated), and the pandemic only increased the already grueling burden. Rabbis had to care for their congregants and assuage their fears and anxieties while they themselves were fearful, anxious, and even ill. The pandemic made rabbis feel even more isolated and exhausted than they ordinarily feel. But at least with these WhatsApp groups they recognized that they were not alone in their loneliness and seemingly endless exhaustion. They realized that there were dozens, nay hundreds, of rabbis who felt the same as they did. The dark veil was slightly lifted.

But an even more significant benefit grew out of these WhatsApp groups: the long dormant position of gadol emerged from darkness. When I speak of gadol in this context I do not only mean gedolei Torah, whom we will discuss shortly. I refer also to the medical gedolim communities deferred to; physicians with expertise on infectious diseases became the address for many hundreds if not thousands of questions. Rabbis throughout the Modern Orthodox community carefully listened to Dr. Aaron Glatt’s weekly sessions to receive medical guidance and direction. Dr. Glatt (himself a rabbi) was on the WhatsApp chat himself. Rabbis would specifically pose questions to him, sometimes prefaced with the abbreviation QFD, questions for doctor, and he would respond. The Modern Orthodox rabbinate coalesced around a central medical figure and largely adhered to the same medical guidelines, guidelines which without question saved lives.
Of equal, if not greater importance, the position of posek truly emerged in Modern Orthodox communities. Rabbis would pose questions to poskim and the WhatsApp chat labeled these as QFP—question for poskim. Of course, there have always been senior rabbinic figures to whom rabbis posed their own questions. But in the past, a posek would respond to a single rabbi with a private letter that sometimes was later published as part of a larger collection of responsa. Now however, multiple rabbis would pose a question to the posek, most often Rav Hershel Schachter, and he would respond to multiple rabbis at once. Further, it used to take considerable time for a pesak to be disseminated. With WhatsApp questions, the posek not only responded to many rabbis at once, but did so rapidly and in public. Everyone in the WhatsApp group could see the question and read the answer. Every rabbi could question the approach the posek took and ask for clarification. The conversation that ensued was animated and fruitful.

For quite some time, perhaps forever, the Modern Orthodox community in the diaspora has rarely if ever had poskim who drafted responsa, or teshuvot. Certainly the leading lights of the generations issued halakhic rulings. But by and large, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik did not write teshuvot, nor did Rav Aharon Lichtenstein or any of Rav Soloveitchik’s successors. Their rulings were issued orally to the individual questioner, and consequently, there was often some uncertainty about what exactly Rav Soloveitchik said. What precisely was the question? Were there extenuating circumstances? Did the one asking properly understand the answer given? Every nuance matters when it comes to pesak. Even well-publicized opinions were questioned and rightly so. Without a written record, uncertainty abounds. Despite the novelty of the medium, WhatsApp teshuvot are written teshuvot, and thus many of these concerns were removed.

A consequence of COVID is that teshuvah writing emerged in the Modern Orthodox world. The teshuvot of Rav Hershel Schachter were spread on these WhatsApp and publicized even further on YUTorah. The widespread popularity of Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, who is in Israel, led to separate WhatsApp groups where diaspora rabbis posed him their questions, COVID related or otherwise. Often these rabbis were treated to a full teshuvah in response to their query. Together with the teshuvot penned by Rav Asher Weiss, which have subsequently been published as a full collection of responsa, these teshuvot will be a primary source to look at to discover what was on the rabbinic mind and each stage of the pandemic. More importantly, as a result of COVID, American rabbis came to appreciate the role of a posek to whom they could pose their pressing questions and become a part of the traditional teshuvah writing process.

Even now, when the darkest days of COVID have thankfully passed and there are fewer and fewer COVID related questions, the rabbinic WhatsApp groups continue to flourish. Questions about particular kosher certifications, questions of locating contact information for certain individuals, or detailed but not overly complex halakhic questions are posed by rabbis to rabbis. Rabbis are engaging with each other, looking for sources, and asking questions of one another. The collegial spirit that developed during the grimmest hours of COVID has continued and hopefully will remain even once we fully emerge into the sunlight.

There is a paradox here. At that same time that COVID ripped communities asunder and created isolation and increased communal decentralization, a new spirit of collegiality and centralized guidance has come forth. Community rabbis have connected more with each other. Communities are now more than ever looking towards poskim for guidance on larger issues. Thus, even with the new challenges to the rabbinate and community structures that decentralization will pose, the inter-rabbinic fellowship is a ray of light that shines out as we approach the end of the dark tunnel of COVID.

1 Much credit for the establishment of these WhatsApp groups goes to Rabbi Reuven Taragin of Yeshivat Hakotel.