

Brawl in Ponevezh

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

"A brawl erupted at the Ponevezh Yeshiva, where a prominent rabbi, Shmuel Markovitz, was physically assaulted by a student of a rival faction, sparking the violent confrontation between Rav Markovitz's students, who refer to themselves as 'the Mehablim', a Hebrew word meaning terrorists or saboteurs, then stormed the yeshiva dormitories of their long-time rivals, 'the Sonim', or 'the haters'. The students vandalized dorm rooms and hurled furniture at one another, and a canister of tear gas was released in the compound.

"The two groups support rival rabbis for the yeshiva's leadership. One, Rav Markovitz, who was assaulted at the start of the melee, is married to the founder's granddaughter; the other Rav Eliezer Kahaneman is the founder's grandson. Conflict has raged between their supporters since the 1990s.

"Ambulance workers said dozens of people were injured and 13 were hospitalized for tear gas inhalation. Last Thursday police arrested 30 of the yeshiva's students for provoking and participating in the battle."

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Some background. Amongst the many and significant yeshivas (post-high-school theological colleges) in Israel, three stand above the rest and effectively dominate the non-Chasidic, Lithuanian Charedi world, both in size and in reputation. They are Chevron, Mir, and Ponevezh. Each has thousands of students from around the Jewish world. Their students devote themselves exclusively to studying Talmud and classical Jewish sources. They also emphasize (or have in the past) "Mussar", a moral movement founded by Rav Israel Salanter to add an ethical and human dimension to the academic study of the Talmud and its commentators. Their role call of alumni makes them the Oxbridge or the Ivy League of the religious world.

Chevron was started in Hebron, Palestine in 1924, with alumni from Slabodka. Twenty-four of its students were massacred by Arabs in 1929, and its building was sacked. It moved to Geulah, in Jerusalem, and became the yeshiva of the yishuv, of the nascent Jewish state. Most of the early Israeli rabbinate were graduates, and alone of the great yeshivas, it supported the state. After the Second World War, the remnant of the Eastern European yeshivas started to relocate to Israel. Mir went from Lithuania, via Shanghai, to Jerusalem, and the late Rav Yosef Kahaneman, the Ponevezher Rav back in Lithuania, established Ponevezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak.

During the 40s and 50s, Chevron was dominant. But slowly Ponevezh began to

expand and grow. I first met Rav Kahaneman when he came to London to raise funds and stayed at my aunt and uncle Winegarten's home in Norrice Lea. He was an impressive, charismatic man who, whenever he was asked why he decided to set up a yeshiva in such a small, unimportant settlement, replied, "I may be dreaming, but that doesn't mean I am sleeping." Rav Kahaneman invited the magisterial moral leader, Rav Dessler (with whom my father had studied), to join him, and other Torah giants too. As Ponevezh grew, so too did Bnei Brak into the vibrant, fiercely Orthodox city it is today, where both Lithuanian and Chasidic rabbis vie for power and control. Mir at that time was still a small institution in Jerusalem with a few hundred, mainly married, older students. Now of course it is several thousand strong.

Many of the early heads of Mir, Be'er Ya'akov, Slobodka, and Ponevezh had been contemporaries of my father at Mir in Lithuania. So when I first arrived in Israel to study in 1958, I was helped immensely by this old network which opened doors to me that otherwise would have been closed. Among them, Rav Dovid Povarsky of Ponevezh, Rav Moshe Shapiro of Be'er Ya'akov, and the Finkels of Mir all had fond memories of my father, and this certainly helped when it came to getting my rabbinical ordination from them.

Ponevezh, however, was the up-and-coming magnet that attracted the elite students (other than, possibly, Brisk). Legend has it that one day Rav Kahaneman was sitting at a wedding next to Rav Chatzkel Sarna of Chevron, and Rav Sarna asked Rav Kahaneman why it was that his yeshiva had lost its lead, whereas Rav Kahaneman's was growing exponentially. Rav Kahaneman is said to have answered that in Chevron the daughters of the Rosh Yeshiva decided who would be the Rosh Yeshivas (sons-in-law could expect automatic preferment) whereas in Ponevezh Rav Kahaneman himself made the decisions based on merit. He thought he was a better judge. Nepotism was already well imbedded. Nowadays all the big yeshivas are oligarchies, and either sons or sons-in-law vie for the top positions, and, with a few notable exceptions, intellectual or moral greatness are rarely the winners.

After the Six Day War, large numbers of students turned the trickle into a tidal wave of students from outside Israel. This brought serious financial support to the yeshivas. Then a change in Israeli politics that brought the more religious-friendly Herut party to power increased the funding, and the yeshiva population exploded from hundreds to thousands. Suddenly they became huge financial institutions with big budgets and, as with Chasidic dynasties, the new generation began to fight for control and power.

If you follow Charedi life, you know about the struggles that have led to splits, rivalries and, in the case of the wealthiest of them all, the Satmar Chasidim, a fissure between Reb Aharon and Reb Zalman, the two sons of the previous Rebbe. Sadly, such splits are now almost universal, both in Israel and the USA, and to make matters worse the growing number of hormonally suppressed young men who do not have sport as a physical outlet have started to use intra-religious territorial disputes as a way of letting off steam.

What were once institutions admired for their learning and their spirituality are now places where fights erupt regularly, over either politics or succession. In Jerusalem last summer, the elections for mayor pitted two

competing "Great Rabbis" against each other. Their yeshiva student supporters enjoyed their summer vacation beating each other up and assaulting venerable rabbis. Now in Ponevezh, fighting over succession has become a stain on the Charedi world for tolerating such infighting and rival gangs. Of course they are not nearly as violent as the gangs of Chicago and LA, but they are disturbing. You will hear apologists tell you that these are the exceptions. That's not true. They are symptoms of an attitude already prevalent.

If a major part of our religious world is turning to violence and aggression to settle its disputes now, I fear greatly for our future when they grow up and take control. There is already too much aggression on the streets of Bet Shemesh, on buses in Jerusalem, and now on airplanes over mixed seating. I wonder why we have allowed our religion to be hijacked by bullies.

Unless the leadership does something now, and acts instead of pretending it's an exception, it will be too late, and the moral grandeur and glory of Torah will be dragged through the dirt.

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