It Takes a Kollel: How Higher Learning is Transforming American Jewry

By Yaakov Feitman

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T o begin to appreciate what a revolution this has brought about, one need only quote from a secular historian who calls full time Torah study “a waste of literate intelligence…a sad waste of human resources, a misapplied investment of learned intelligence.” Such an attitude was common, if sometimes unspoken, until the mid 1970s. Yet, today there are (ken yirbu!) close to 4000 kollel members in the United States, from Miam to M Iowaakee, from Boca Raton, D Nueva, Scrannton to St. Louis. In addition, kollelim in cities such as Melbourne, M exico City and M ontral indicate that kollel has become a phenomenon of international proportions.

Was kollel always the custom in Klal Yisrael? To be sure, the earliest Torah sources extol the virtues of combining Torah study with a livelihood and many of the Talmudic sages were known by the professions they practiced, in addition to being pillars of Torah Shebaal Peh, the Oral Law. However, as early as the 12th century, Rabbanim Torah spoke of “a diminishment of the hearts.” And called for full time Torah study to the exclusion of other pursuits. Rambam, in a famous passage, virtually guarantees that those who devote themselves to a lifetime of Torah study—like the Leveite tribe of—will be provided with all of their worldly needs. Similarly, in a number of places, Rashi stresses that individuals who devote their lives to Torah learning will merit the heavenly protection of their earthly needs.

In the early 15th century, Rabbi Shimmon ben Tazach Duran concluded that despite his disinclination to encourage scholars to accept payment for their studies, “now that the power of memory has been diminished and if people who engage in work, they will not succeed in their studies, it has become permissible to study day and night to benefit from the revelation. According to the need of the generation this may be considered absolute piety.” In our own day, Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Volozhin, approached the well-known chavrusa (chavruta learning) which takes place during the day. Furthermore, kollel is a complete gemara which lasts until the late hours of the evening. These sessions are never permitted to detract from the chavrusa (study partner) learning which takes place during the day.

The concept of kollel is that a kollel recipient is minimal at best, and rarely sufficient to support what are generally large families. Yet, despite perhaps because of—the substantive challenges of the kollel “kollel families” tend to live with joy and an infectious enthusiasm for Torah.

The Contemporary Kollel

How did kollel as we now know it begin? Interestingly, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, known as the founder of the M usar movement, seems to have been the first to develop the contemporary kollel as well. Reb Yisrael became aware of a fund that had just been created for Torah purposes but was as yet undefined. He recommended that it be used “to establish batei midrash for married scholars to continue their studies.” Even as Reb Yisrael was engaged in discussions about this idea with the other gedolim of the day, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel—known as the Alter of Slobodka—began the process and opened the first kollel in Slobodka, outside Kovno.

In the year 5637-38 (1877-78), ten scholars began their full-time studies, following a curriculum which included the study of musar (character improvement). In 1879, Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spektor, the rav of the city, became the head of what had become known as the “Kollel Perushim of Kovno.” Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel served as the mahajICH (spiritual mentor) of the kollel but in 1880 left this position so he could devote himself to organizing more kollelim throughout Eastern Europe. He was succeeded by Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, also known as Reb Ized Peterburger, one of the major leaders of Reb Yisrael.

Soon after these historic events, a similar and independent process took place in Volozhin. Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, rosh yeshivah of Volozhin, approached the world’s leading scholars and inquired “ten exceptional Torah scholars” to serve as the mahajICH of the kollel. Despite the remarkable success and proliferation of the European kollel in the early part of the century, the American soil did not seem hospitable to kollelim. Writing to his friend and personal physician in 1942, Rabbi Eliehu Desser, author of Mishot MeRav Yisrael Brodsky in 1886 with the idea of starting a kollel for young men. On the 12th of Tishrei 5647 (1886), the mahajICH of Volozhin, Rabbi Shlomo Dov Dinin, published a full paper (Michtav MeEliyahu) inviting “ten exceptional Torah scholars to dwell before Hashem in the yeshivah of Volozhin to prepare themselves to render halachic decisions for Klal Yisrael, for no less than five years.” Eventually, the N etziv and Rabbi Chaim Solovetchik would carefully choose the ten avre-im, today called jungiste, (pl. of youngmen) many of whom went on to become the leaders of the next generation. Today kollelim sprung up in major cities throughout Eastern Europe, including Cracow, Lublin, Pressburg and Vilna.

Although this early kollel was formed with specific goals and time limitations, many of today’s kollelim deliberately reject such parameters. Significant numbers of kollelim members study indefinitely and do not necessarily enter the rabbinate. As many leading rosh yeshivah have told me—times have indeed changed. The depravity of the world at large—required—an ever growing cadre of Torah scholars whose contribution to the world’s study programs is D espite the remarkable success and...the kollel boasts the participation of over 500 university students annually including many from Harvard and Boston University.
Jersey, but generated kollelim in some 18 cities, 4 countries and 3 continents. These Torah centers have in turn become the inspiration for other institutions in their areas.

How did Reb Aharon succeed where others failed? According to Rabbi Eliezer Goldstein, director of BMG’s Division of New Kollelim, it was primarily the work of one of the unsung heroes of Torah growth—Rebbe Nissim Wachtogoff, the Lakewood mashgiach, who worked under the guidance of Rabbi Aharon Kotler. At first, he traveled to each community and met with its leadership, convincing them of the great benefits of hosting a kollel. Then he identified the yungeleit from Lakewood who would be successful in each city, persuading, encouraging and guiding them and their families to devote themselves to this sacred task. In the early years of this process, every Elul, Rabbi Wachtogoff would speak in the 30 cities where he had founded kollelim.

The Community Kollel

In an addition to the traditional kollel, generally associated with a yeshiva gedolah, a new kind of kollel has developed, widely known as the community kollel. Here the yungeleit can pursue rigorous Torah study during the morning and afternoon with their own peers in the traditional manner. They then return home to join their families for a few hours and are back in the kollel by 8:00 PM. At this point, the kollel has changed to a focus on serving as the central address for the community on a one-to-one basis or delivering lectures on college campuses, as well as in JCCs and senior citizen centers. Invariably, this community kollel succeeds in having an enormous impact.

For instance, the Toronto kollel, under the leadership of Rabbi Shlomo Miller, has influenced thousands of lives in its 34 years of operation. It has been instrumental in the opening of five yeshivot, five mitzvot and even spawned another kollel last year. The Ashdod kollel boasts an interesting insight concerning the kiruv aspect of a kollel: the primary purpose of a community kollel is to study Torah. This is done with all the intensity, purity and holiness which have characterized Torah study through the ages. Once Torah is being studied in a city, the atmosphere of the community changes. The very atoms, molecules and fabric of the community become rearranged. A think for Torah is created.

The kollel’s success, however, has less to do with kiruv strategies or creative programming and more to do with the inherent power of Torah. An example of this phenomenon is the Chicago Community Kollel, where one man who had never set foot in the kollel started learning with a da’irut in his house.

“Everyone in town is learning,” he declared to a friend. “Let’s do it too.”

Indeed, one of the oldest of the community kollelim, the Chicago Community Kollel, launched 22 years ago, annually reaches over 1,000 unaffiliated Jews. Additionally it has already returned 30 rabbinim to the community. It has also helped six of its alumni in rabbinical positions. Like many kollelim, this community kollel has fostered a spirit of togetherness, and its success has inspired other communities to follow in its footsteps.

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There have been some extremely moving developments in Chicago as a result of the kollel. A college student from Chapagain was influenced by one of the more fiery members of the kollel. Several years later he totally ignorant of your own heritage? Come with me.” Mordechai virtually dragged Barry to the kollel. Undoubtedly, part of the kollel’s share in the World to Come is Barry and his tzitzit, now in Jerusalem, swaying before a Gemara which never gets put down.

Some communities host more than one kollel. In addition to the famed kollel of Telzels, Cleveland is now home to three other kulelim—Hirshfeld and the Torah Tales Kollel, which is part of the Torah Mitzion network. Founded by pioneers such as Robert L. Stark of Cleveland, Torah Mitzion kollelim are affiliated with Yeshivat Mir Etzion ("Gush"), under the leadership of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, as well as other organizations. (See sidebar.) All of these kollelim, which are found in Jewish communities throughout the world, offer a wide variety of shiurim to the public.

The Community Kollel

People of all persuasions come to learn Torah together and burning issues which tend to divide Jews melt away before the flaming words of Abaye and Rava, the Rambam and R’avad, Ketzot and Nitivot.

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Cincinnati Community Kollel

The founding members of the Cincinnati Community Kollel.

Chicago was the scene as well of an unfortunate episode, which,ironically, helped to advance Torah study. The kollel purchased a much-needed building even before it was fully in use. A rabbi set fire to the structure, destroying many religious artifacts. In the ensuing days, the mayor and other officials called for a press conference to be held at the original kollel building in order to express their profound distress. To ensure that the conference would not impede the study of Torah, the room was divided, splitting the already cramped butt midrash in half. While the press conference was in progress, learning continued as usual behind the mechitza. Torah study doesn't stop for mayors, journalists or Arab threats. There were many results of that fateful day. The cardinal wrote a letter expressing sympathy. The Guardian Angels came to offer protection. Most importantly, people who had never seen or understood Torah study discovered the magnitude of its significance. Nothing stops Torah study. You can chop the butt midrash in half, but you don't stop learning Torah. One man was so moved by the dramatic demonstration of this fact—not theory, not talk, but action—that he became a lifelong learner and major supporter of the kollel.

The Kollel Movement

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Kollels with a “Modern” Twist

By Diane Chabott

W anted: four twin beds, two cribs, bookcases, dishes (new)... So read an e-mail message sent last week to members of the Baltimore Religious Zionist community in anticipation of the establishment of a new Torah MiTzion kollel. As in other Torah MiTzion kollelim, the Baltimore kollel is comprised of shelichim, that is, young couples from Israel who transplant themselves and their families to foreign communities for two years to help foster Torah learning.

F ounded nine years ago by a group of young Religious Zionist leaders in Israel, Torah MiTzion is an independent organization that establishes centers of advanced Torah study throughout the world. Today, Torah MiTzion, with an annual budget of $6 million, is represented in 28 communities worldwide. In the US, there is a Torah MiTzion presence in 13 cities including Detroit, Emory, Atlanta, and Boca Raton, as well as on campuses such as Yale, Brandeis and UCLA.

W ith a Religious Zionist orientation, Torah MiTzion is dedicated to promoting the intrinsic link between Torah Yisrael, Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael (the Torah of Israel, the People of Israel and the Land of Israel). “There is a thirst within the Religious Zionist world for serious learning,” explained Zeev Schwartz, the executive director of Torah MiTzion. “Torah MiTzion sets up addresses for learning with a Zionist twist.” Kollelim are generally staffed by a select few American graduates of Yeshiva University and Israeli graduates of heida yeshivot, which combine Jewish study with military service in the Israeli army.

The presence of the Israelis is key to the program’s overall philosophy of strengthening the bond between Diaspora and Israeli Jews and fostering a profound connection to Mekhila Yisrael (the State of Israel). Of course, bolstering Moden Orthodox communities around the world is an equally important part of the Torah MiTzion agenda. “In the Moden Orthodox world, there has never been serious learning outside of Israel, except in institutions such as Yeshiva University,” said Schwartz. “In any Moden Orthodox youth who studied in Israel returned to their communities [in the Diaspora] and wanted to continue learning. However, they had nowhere to turn to except Charedi institutions. Ultimately, they drifted away from Moden Orthodox.

“We felt we needed our own model of Jewish learning, one that would be based on the values of Torah u’Madda and Religious Zionism,” he added. Torah MiTzion is supported by a wide range of organizations including heida yeshivot, the World Mizrachi Movement, Bnei Akiva, Yeshiva University, the Orthodox Union and Hillid.

“We look to see where the kollel would flourish best; sometimes we set up a bet midrash within a school so we can impact the students, teachers and parents. Other times, we set up the kollel in a synagogue,” explains Schwartz. Providing teachers for the community is a priority for Torah MiTzion. “In the past, many Moden Orthodox schools were forced to hire teachers who did not conform to their ideology,” said Schwartz. “Torah MiTzion is helping fill the lack of Tzioni Dati educators and role models.”

Communities that host Torah MiTzion kollelim generally initiate the process with a request for their presence. With that request comes the commitment to support the kollel and its members for at least two years. (That means providing for the living expenses of the kollelim during their stay—housing, food, transportation, schooling for children, medical expenses...). That the kollel is viewed as such an important addition to local Jewish life is highlighted in Baltimore, where Rav Eliahu Shloush is volunteering his services as rosh kollel.

“We live in a world where people play an active role as well. Besides serving as positive religious role models, they often teach in the schools, when the kollelim are school-based. Many have established bet midrash for women of all backgrounds and levels of learning. Some of the wives are scholars in their own right, particularly those in the college-based kollelim," Schwartz said. Cleveland was one of the first sites to initiate a Torah MiTzion kollel nine years ago, establishing the model that would later be reproduced in locations throughout the world. It was already a city steeped in Torah learning when Robert L. Stark determined to build a high school (Fuchs Bet Sefer Mizrachi) in the Religious Zionist mold. Wanting to "Feels we needed our own model of Jewish learning, one that would be based on the values of Torah u’Madda and Religious Zionism," he added.

Cleveland, the newly established Torah MiTzion Community Kollel is affiliated with Yeshivat Ramban, an ivrit b’ivrit school with 400 students. Yeshivat Ramban brought in the kollel, “as a means of strengthening the Bet Tzioni component in the school,” said Dr. Rita Shloush, the school principal and wife of Rav Shloush, rosh kollel. Lauding the newly arrived avreichim, Dr. Shloush says they are “so sweet, the adjustment is hard. When they arrived from Israel, their apartments were not ready; they’ve been living with families.”

Such good feelings exist throughout Torah MiTzion communities. Rabbi Yudi England, from Yeshivat Ramban, arrived at the Cleveland kollel with his family in early August. “In all this time, we’ve only had two Shabbat meals at home. People come up to us in the supermarket and invite us to their homes." Their excitement with learning has left him “stunned.” I feel that I’m growing in my own learning... and their questions makes me think about what I say.”

W hat more could anyone want? For more information, look up www.torahmitzion.org.
wields a special magic and its study takes on a life all its own."

At times kollelim can inspire lifestyle changes that are practically instantaneous. In Boca Raton for example, a family once attended a Friday night lecture by Rabbi Moshe Miller, the rosh kollel. The family expected to drive home in their trailer afterward. However, having been so inspired by the class, they changed their minds and left their mobile home in the shul’s lot until the end of Shabbat.

The dreams of Reb Yisrael, the Netziv and Reb Aharan have come true. Young men are continuing their studies after the chupah and enhancing their status as Torah scholars. But kollel has also become a force for the rejuvenation of communities around the world. The young are learning with the old, the scholar with the uninitiated. The prophetic words of Malachi echo in places where the sweet sounds of Torah were previously unheard:

"Remember the Torah of Moshe, My servant... And He will turn back the hearts of fathers with their sons and the hearts of sons with their fathers..." A final vignette. It was towards the end of Rabbi Wachtfogel’s life. The mashgiach of Lakewood yeshivah was extremely weak and a bachur had to help him hold the Yom Kippur machzor. At the end of Neilah, the final prayer of Yom Kippur, the mashgiach whispered an original supplication of his own. "Master of the universe," the young man overheard the tzaddik beseech, "May it be Your will that we are able to build kollelim everywhere that Jews live." At the loftiest moment of the holiest day, the Torah giant could think of no more significant entreaty than the proliferation of kollelim. Let us add our prayer that these citadels of Torah continue to spread, infusing every community they touch with the spiritual energy of Torah, uplifting and uniting people with the power of our common legacy.

Notes
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3. See Yehudah Levi, Torah Study (Jerusalem, 1990) for an exhaustive study of the sources on exclusive Torah study versus its combination with a profession. See, also, Rabbi Reuven Margolios’ poignant introduction to his Margolios HaYam on Sanhedrin, where he describes the prototypical Rav Yochanan and Ilfa approaches to this dichotomy.
4. Derashot Rabbeinu Yonah, end of Parashat Emor.
6. Commentaries to Shemot 16:32; Tehillim 127:4; Temurah 16a.
7. Tashbetz 1:147.
10. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Plato, Beshevilei Radin, 32.
11. Michtav MeEliyahu, 5: 509. This letter is also an excellent source for the methodology of kollel study as primarily a chavruta not shiur-oriented approach.
13. Leshot Rahmim (Lakewood, 1999), 136.