

THE FUTURE OF MODERN ORTHODOXY IN AMERICA

I found the premise of Rabbi Reuven Spolter's article, ("In Search of Leaders," spring 2004) distressing. To be so concerned that the future of Modern Orthodoxy in America is in jeopardy because an incredibly small number of idealistic, young rabbis and congregants are making *aliyah* is to deny everything that we have yearned and prayed for over the last 2,000 years.

A mere 1,600 Jews made *aliyah* from the United States in 2003 (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics). Of this number, a third came through the efforts of the Nefesh B'Nefesh organization. Rabbi Spolter laments that the departure of Nefesh B'Nefesh Director Rabbi Yehoshua Fass leaves a void because some "major American Modern Orthodox community will not benefit from his wisdom, erudition and leadership." Rabbi Spolter, with all due respect, you have it backwards. We need dozens of people like Rabbi Fass to lead the return of Jews back home, but that seems not to be a goal of your Modern Orthodoxy. Are your "dreams for Modern Orthodoxy in America" more important than the fulfillment of "*Vekabeteinu yachad mearba kanefot ha'aretz*," "Gather us together from the four corners of the earth"? Or is Modern Orthodoxy simply failing to fully appreciate the gift that God has given us in our lifetime? There is something terribly wrong when Orthodox leaders who are scrupulous about inculcating observance of *kashrut* and Shabbat are ambivalent about the mitzvah of *aliyah* because of the consequences to American Jewry.

At the time of the first Zionist Congress in 1897, barely 1 percent of the world's Jewish population lived in Israel. Today nearly 40 percent of the world's Jews live here. The Hebrew language has been revived, and Israel today is a thriving center of Torah learning. Can you imagine the impact that even a small percentage of the best Modern Orthodox leaders could have were they living in Israel? Can you envision the possibility of a critical mass of families like the Blooms literally turning this country into a "light unto the nations," and ultimately bringing about the true fulfillment of "*Ki miTzion teitzei Torah*"—even if it is a loss to Detroit and to American Modern Orthodoxy?

I could go back to being a day school principal in the United States, have Sundays off and make the kind of money I can't even dream of earning here. Instead, I choose to be part of the unfolding destiny of our people in the land of our ancestors.

Peter Abelow
Efrat, Israel

Is Rabbi Spolter advocating a new brand of Modern Orthodoxy where adherents are serious about *halachah*, about the Torah interface with secular studies and about *da'at Torah*, but not so serious about their commitment to Israel and to *mitzvat yishuv Ha'aretz*? This would be a huge step backwards in the revival of passionate observance among the ranks of Modern Orthodoxy.

If so many of Rabbi Spolter's would-be leaders are moving to Israel, it is because they are being true to the teachings of their *rabbanim*, not because they have failed to fight some type of *yetzer hara*.

Sara (Klein) and David Eisen
Bet Shemesh, Israel

The mental acrobatics required for Rabbi Spolter to describe *aliyah* as an "ominous sign for the American Modern Orthodox community," while at the same time as something that helps us "reach the Ultimate Redemption" reflects a challenging internal conflict within Modern Orthodoxy today.

If you look at the mission statement of almost any Modern Orthodox school in America, you will likely find some expressed desire to impart a commitment not only to the land of Israel, but also to the *State* of Israel. If you walk into most Modern Orthodox shuls on Shabbat morning, you will hear the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel being recited. There is no question that Modern Orthodoxy is virtually synonymous with Religious Zionism.

While more Modern Orthodox leaders making *aliyah* means fewer of them leading communities in North America, this cannot be viewed as an external threat to Modern Orthodoxy, but rather as an internal ideological tension. The following

questions need to be seriously considered: How does American Modern Orthodoxy ultimately envision itself? Do we view Modern Orthodoxy in America as a permanent fixture, as a Rome that will always coexist with Jerusalem? Why has Religious Zionism become a central tenet of Modern Orthodox ideology? Is this coincidental, or are the two movements related fundamentally?

Our community generally affirms the religious significance of the State of Israel, seeing it as *reishit tzemichat Geulateinu* (the beginning of the flowering of the Redemption). Does this concept carry with it any practical obligations? If so, do we say that *aliyah* is the best way to contribute to "the rebuilding of the modern State of Israel" or is supporting the State spiritually, financially or politically sufficient?

Only once we have considered how, or whether, answers to these questions can be integrated into one holistic ideology, can we approach the crisis in leadership in our community from a philosophically harmonious perspective, without investing in solutions that undermine our most precious values.

Avidan Freedman
National Education Director
Bnei Akiva of the United States
and Canada

Rabbi Spolter is worried that as a result of the leadership vacuum in the Modern Orthodox community, "members of the right-wing community will continue to gladly fill the rabbinic and teaching roles that we do not." Here in Israel, however, we face a much more ominous danger—that of Shinui leader Tommy Lapid and his ilk continuing to turn Israel into an increasingly left-wing, anti-religious country. Although a family like the Blooms can have a more readily apparent impact in a community in the Diaspora as opposed to one in Israel, their possible accomplishments in the latter are no less significant, and maybe even more so.

Rabbi Spolter seems to feel that today's Jewish leaders should remain behind to keep the Diaspora communities going until the Redemption arrives. They should be the ones to turn out the lights on their way out, packing up what remains of the communities to join one of the last waves of immigration.

There's only one problem with this approach—the masses aren't going! The lay and rabbinic leaders whose loss he bemoans are pretty much the *only* people making *aliyah* today from North America. Were they to remain behind waiting for the others to go, *aliyah* would grind to a halt.

The reason the leaders are making *aliyah* even when the masses are not is directly connected to the reasons these leaders are so needed in America. Rabbi Spolter points out the dichotomy that exists within Modern Orthodoxy—the rabbis and educators articulate a certain philosophy, but on the ground, the people who live it often have very different ideas.

Rabbi Spolter was excited when the Bloom family moved into his community because he saw a non-rabbinical family who embodied the ideals that he preaches—meticulous observance of *halachah*, including standards of *tzeniut* and a commitment to serious Torah study, while remaining engaged with the modern world. But was it an accident that this was specifically the family who chose to make *aliyah*? Their thirst for living in the Holy Land was a result of their thirst for keeping all of these other *mitzvot*. They made *aliyah* in order to be able to live a life of Torah much more fully than they could have in Michigan, or anywhere else outside of the Land.

When each leadership family "goes up" to live life on a higher plane, they must be respected, admired and imitated.

Rabbi Alan Haber
Director
Michelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim

Rabbi Spolter raises many important issues in his discussion regarding the challenges faced by those who are torn between making *aliyah* and working in the North American Jewish community. As a student at Yeshiva College, I am living through the exact conflict described by Rabbi Spolter. Coming from Vancouver, a small Orthodox community, I am also aware of the great need for talented Jewish educators and rabbis.

Nevertheless, I feel that Rabbi Spolter has omitted an essential aspect of the discussion. As the spiritual and physical home of the Jewish people, *Eretz Yisrael* needs our help. The notion of *aliyah* as a contribution to Israel seems to have faded from our consciousness. Thirty years ago organizations educating people about *aliyah* and Israel stressed the needs of the country as the primary reason for moving; today this is not the case. Jews must be made aware of the facts: The Arab population living in Israel will soon outnumber the Jewish population; the Israeli economy needs more professionals; the country needs more Orthodox Jews to make it their home. *Aliyah* must be considered from two perspectives: the individual and the national. We must ask ourselves: What can we do for our country? Where are we more needed? True, American Jewry may need us now, but Israel needs us for the future.

Ryan Nadel
Vancouver/New York

No reader of *Jewish Action* could read the wonderful, yet heartbreaking, article by Rabbi Spolter without shedding a tear on his findings concerning the vital need for rabbis in Modern Orthodox communities, especially in the far-flung ones.

I was privileged to learn in, and then serve as educational director of, a program in Israel called Amiel, where young rabbis commit to learn the skills needed to serve as spiritual leaders in Jewish communities throughout the world. In return for this commitment, a stipend is offered, one that obligates each Amiel fellow to serve a minimum of two years in such a community.

Indeed, this program is but one of many in Israel that have taken up the challenge described by Rabbi Spolter. But while these programs have proven to be successful, I submit that the most suitable candidate to lead a community in the hinterlands is one who is a native of the particular country in which he is serving (and is, therefore, familiar with the local mentality). The Modern Orthodox rabbinate must encourage young rabbis and educators to “go out” to ensure the continuity of Modern Orthodoxy outside of metropolitan areas.

Rabbi Y.C. Grunstein
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Halifax, Nova Scotia

Rabbi Spolter responds

During the construction of Rabbi Berel Wein’s yeshivah in Monsey, one of the student’s parents called the *rosh yeshivah* with good news: Instead of building the yeshivah with Douglas fir, the standard framing wood, for a small amount more, he would be able to procure special Finnish wood. While the Douglas fir begins to decay after ninety years, the Finnish wood was guaranteed to last over 150.

After listening to the man’s generous offer, Rabbi Wein thanked him but turned him down. “Douglas fir will be good enough for our yeshivah high school. In America we build too well, and we build for too long. We don’t need wood that will outlast our grandchildren’s great-grandchildren. Historically, there are very few Jewish buildings that remain in Jewish hands after ninety years.”

Over two years ago, I began a weekly *shiur* in my home on *Eim Habanim Semeichah*, Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal’s seminal work on Religious Zionism written during the Holocaust. If I had to boil it down to its very essence, the book tells its readers in every possible way, “Move to Israel.” We’re in the middle of the third chapter, and he’s still saying the same thing: “Move to Israel. Settle and build the Land of Israel.” If I find it so repetitive, why do we continue to learn the book? I love learning Rav Teichtal’s work not only for his powerful writing, startling honesty and prophetic wisdom, but also because of issues that arise from the text. It’s not just about the message. It’s about the discussion, and how we grow from the give-and-take of the discourse.

If I have anything to say to someone contemplating *aliyah* (and even to those not contemplating it), it would be: “Move to Israel. Raise your children in Israel. Contribute to Israeli society and make the Jewish State more Jewish.” Of course Israel needs us, perhaps even more than we need Israel, and if the price for building the State is sending our best and brightest, so be it.

Rather than seeing Americans who make *aliyah* as Benedict Arnolds, I see them as Founding Fathers of Modern Orthodoxy. These leaders make all the right choices: idealism over pragmatism, spiritual fulfillment over financial well being, communal selflessness over personal ambition. The most committed and dedicated in the Modern Orthodox community should not remain behind and turn out the lights for the American Jewish community. They should continue to follow their ideals and make a difference in the most important place for Jews to live in the world today.

That being said, *aliyah* does have real consequences not only for Israel, but for America as well, and ignoring that reality will not change it, no matter how hard we try. We have been treating the symptoms while ignoring the underlying illness for far too long.

In my article I insufficiently outlined the efforts we currently do make to contend with these consequences. Under the leadership of Yeshiva University President Richard Joel, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) has begun to expand its role in the greater community, sending its students out into the field for Shabbat programs, summer *yarchei kallah* and even community *kollelim*. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah has blossomed, and is now beginning to send its graduates out into the field. Also, while highlighting the shortcomings inherent in Kollel Torah MiTzion, I failed to give it the credit that it rightfully deserves. In Detroit, the members of our local Kollel Torah MiTzion have undoubtedly subtly transformed the landscape of the Modern Orthodox community. Through numerous *shiurim*, *chavrutot*, programs and events, they instill a renewed sense of passion and pride for Torah and Israel in the members of our community. Our *kollel* plays an integral role in my shul, our local day school and our community. I cherish the members of the *kollel* as personal friends and valuable community assets, and despite any shortcomings inherent in the Kollel Torah MiTzion model, I continue to wholeheartedly recommend bringing an Israeli *kollel* to every new community.

I don’t like my “solution” very much. Like chemotherapy that puts a patient into temporary remission, my suggestion might delay the inevitable, but it certainly isn’t a cure. If we do end up producing more community leaders, teachers and rabbis and sending them out into the field, their dedication will only pull them towards *aliyah* even more strongly. And, having tasted the sweet fruits of devotion to a higher ideal and experienced leaving family, restaurants and the creature comforts of New York, Israel won’t be far behind.

So we find ourselves caught in a communal paradox—a Modern Orthodox catch-22; the more successful we become, the more we destroy our Diaspora community. Perhaps then, we need to begin to ask the most difficult questions. What do we envision for our community ten, fifty or even one hundred years in the future? Do we even want there to be a Modern Orthodox community in

America at the turn of the twenty-second century? What do we want to build? What future do we wish to create for our children? Are we building that future, or just riding the waves, adding pieces haphazardly without any specific vision or goal?

In the middle of the first chapter of *Eim Habanim Semeichah*, Rav Teichtal quotes a *gemara* in *Bava Metzia* that discusses the two ways to perform *meshichah*, one method used to acquire an animal.

The first is when the purchaser calls the animal and it follows him. The second is when he strikes it with a stick and it runs away before him.... Which type of meshichah does the animal prefer? The meshichah by way of calling, of course, because the animal feels no pain. The meshichah by way of hitting, on the other hand, hurts, and the animal suffers the pain of the blow.

We are in the same position before the Holy One Blessed be He regarding the call to return to Eretz Yisrael. If we heed

God’s voice that calls us to return to our Land, then we will personify the aspect of meshichah by way of calling.... If however, we do not strive to return to our Land willingly, and we wait until the staff comes and strikes us ... we will suffer the agony and pain of the staff of our enemies until they force us to run before Hashem to Eretz Yisrael (trans. Moshe Lichtman).

Does any regular reader of *Jewish Action* doubt the accuracy of Rav Teichtal’s words? If Jewish history teaches us anything, it’s that our future lies not in an everlasting community in North America, but in the Land of Israel. When we build a new school, shul, mikvah or community center in America, how long are we building it for? Are we building it for our needs today, or for the far-fetched hope that our grandchildren’s great-grandchildren will one day inhabit it?

I do not see any simple answers to this problem. But if my article succeeded in nothing else, it began the conversation. To my mind, that’s an important beginning. **JA**