Counterpoint

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 aliya is to deny everything that we have yearned and most of us have worked for. 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 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 Jews back home, but that seems not to be a goal of your Modern Orthodoxy. Although some “concerned that the future of Modern Orthodoxy in America more important than the leadership.” Rabbi Spolter is worried that as a result of the leadership vacuums 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 has 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 aliyah. 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 aliya today from North America. Were they to remain behind waiting for the others to go, aliya would grind to a halt. The reason the leaders are making aliya 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 rabbi 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—muciligious observance of halachah, including standards of tznisus 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 aliya? Their thirst for living in the Holy Land was a result of their attempt to keep aliya on their radar. They made aliya 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 on a higher plane, they must be acknowledged and imitated. Rabbi Alan Haber Director Michlelet Mevaateret Yerushalayim

Rabbi Spolter raises many important issues in his discussion regarding the challenges faced by those who are torn between making aliya 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 Cleveland and the rabbinate, I am aware of the 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, Israel needs more Jews. The notion of aliya as a contribution to Israel seems to have faded from our consciousness. Thirty years ago organizations educating people about aliya and Israel stressed the needs of the country as the primary reason for moving; today that is not the case. Jews must be 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 a home. Aliya 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 heartbreakingly, 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 committed 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 Spalter. 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 rabbi must encourage young rabbis and educators to “go out” to ensure the continuity of Modern Orthodoxy outside of metropolitan areas.

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Rabbi Spalter responds

Rather than seeing Americans who make aliya as Benedict Arnold’s, 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, aliya 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, chararotu, 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 our 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 aliya 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 Orthodoxy 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 Ein Habaanim Semeichah, Rav Teichtal quotes a gemara in Bava Metzia that discusses the two ways to perform mesichah, 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 mesichah does the animal prefer? The mesichah by way of calling, of course, because the animal feels no pain. The mesichah 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 mesichah 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 Erets 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.