

We've come a long way. Just a few decades ago, most Jewish communities throughout the United States resisted the idea of Jewish day school education. Even once yeshivah education became established, young men would ordinarily rush headlong from their high school graduations to the halls of academia to secure the college degrees denied to their parents, graduates of institutions such as Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

Today, boys graduating high school almost automatically proceed to at least a year of study in a *yeshivah gedolah* (post high school yeshivah) in Israel or closer to home. They will return, almost invariably, with a deeper appreciation of *Yiddishkeit*, more committed to a lifetime of Torah study and permanently imbued with a profound respect for scholars and the unique world of the *beit midrash*.

But some of them—more and more with each passing year—take the additional step of joining a *kollel*.* Instead of pursuing the formerly de rigueur Jewish professions of medicine, law, business, and education, they will continue with full-time Torah study, beginning their married lives immersed in learning. (*Kollelim* are specific to married men; unmarried men can, of course, learn full time in a yeshivah but they are not formally members of a *kollel*.)

To begin to appreciate what a revolution this has brought about, one

Rabbi Feitman is rabbi of Congregation Kehillas Bais Yehudah Tzvi in Cedarhurst, New York.

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 misapplication of learned intelligence.”¹ Such an attitude was common, if sometimes unspoken, until the mid 1970s. Yet, today there are (*kein yirbu!*) close to

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

By Yaakov Feitman

4000 *kollel* members in the United States,² from Miami to Milwaukee, Boston to Boca Raton, Deal to Denver, Scranton to St. Louis. In addition, *kollelim* in cities such as Melbourne, Mexico City and Montreal 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 prac-

ticed, in addition to being pillars of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, the Oral Law.³

However, as early as the 12th century, Rabbeinu Yonah spoke of “a diminishing of the hearts,”⁴ 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 Levite tribe of old—will be provided with all of their worldly needs.⁵ Similarly, in a number of places, Rashi stresses that individuals who devote their lives to Torah learning will merit the heavenly provision of their earthly needs.⁶

In the early 15th century, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach 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 will engage in work, they will not succeed in their studies, it has become permissible to study day and night and to benefit from the congregation. According to the need of the generation this may be considered absolute piety.”⁷ In our own day, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein has invoked the concept of *eit*

la'asot, the imperative to save the Torah by radical means, to justify supporting those engaged in full-time study. Going even further, Reb Moshe asserts that “those who oppose this mode of Torah study have succumbed to the wiles of the evil inclination... to cause scholars to abandon the Torah.”⁸

The concept of paying someone to study Torah for many years may seem foreign to some, but its strangeness derives from the fact that Torah study is unique. Unlike other pursuits, the study of Torah is desirable in its own

right. Every word of Torah studied, every verse or Talmudic dictum explored, changes the world for the better and brings one closer to God. Whereas literature or the sciences are studied with a goal in mind—making new discoveries, publishing or gaining new understanding—the study of Torah on the part of any Jew uplifts the entire nation. Thus the scholar at his studies is providing a crucial service to all of Israel. An almost incidental benefit is that *kollel* tends to produce the future leaders of Israel. Generally, today's rabbis, *dayanim* (judges), *roshei yeshivah* and teachers all come from the ranks of the *kollel*.

Lest anyone think that a *kollel yungerman* (young man in *kollel*) leads a life of leisure or semi-retirement, it should be noted that learning in a *kollel* is actually an incredibly rigorous way of life. Every *kollel* requires that scholars engage in intense study for upwards of ten hours a day. In addition, in community *kollelim*, members must teach a variety of subjects to challenging and diverse groups of students until the late hours of the evening. These sessions are never permitted to detract from the “*chavruta* (study partner) learning” which takes place during the day. Furthermore, *kollel* members receive stipends that are minimal at best, and rarely suffice to support what are generally large families. Yet, despite—perhaps because of—the substantive challenges of *kollel* life, “*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, best known as the founder of the *Musar* 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.”⁹ 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 *mashgiach* (spiritual mentor) of the *kollel* but in 1880 left this position so he could devote himself to establishing more *kollelim* throughout Eastern Europe. He was succeeded by Rabbi Yitzchak Blazer, also known as Reb Itzel Peterburger, one of the major disciples 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 well-known philanthropist Reb Yisrael Brodsky in 1886 with the idea of starting a *kollel* for young men. On the 12th of Tishrei 5647 (1886), the *mashgiach* of Volozhin, Rabbi Shlomo Dov Dinkin, placed an ad in the paper *Hameilitz* 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 three nor more than five years.” Eventually, the Netziv and Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik would carefully choose the ten *avreichim*, today called *yungeleit*, (pl. of *yungerman*) many of whom went on to

become the leaders of the next generation.¹⁰ Soon *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 *kollel* members study indefinitely and do not necessarily enter the rabbinate. As many leading *roshei yeshivah* have told me—times have indeed changed. The depravity of the world at large welcomes—requires!—an ever growing cadre of Torah scholars whose contribution to the world is Torah study per se.

Despite the remarkable success and

...the kollel boasts the participation of over 500 university students annually including many from Harvard and Boston University.

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 1943, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, author of *Michtav MeEliyahu*, bemoaned the fact that “all efforts to found a *kollel* in America have failed.”¹¹ And yet, that same year, the great builder of Torah, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, succeeded in establishing the first American *kollel* in White Plains, New York. Despite a climate of antagonism to what some termed “Kotlerism,” Reb Aharon not only built Beth Medrash Govoha (BMG), which soon moved to Lakewood, New

pleted a summer program there and were packing to leave. “We’re not letting them go,” an agitated voice declared. “The community needs them.” It took three more summers with the SEED program but a *kollel* finally came to Minneapolis.

Mr. Shulman uses a parable to explain the SEED program’s success in spawning *kollelim*. An entrepreneur decides to manufacture shirts in a third-world country where he can employ cheap labor. While he pays the laborers minimum wages, they are content since they can purchase things they never had before. However, once they purchase all that there is to buy in the village, they quit. The frantic manufacturer airlifts in 100 copies of the Montgomery-Ward catalogue and drops one in front of every hut. The workers return.

Similarly, Mr. Shulman observes, in many cities, SEED programs provide a taste of authentic Jewish learning to individuals who have never experienced it before. *Ta’amu ureu ki tov, Taste it [Torah] and see that it is good.* Once they sample Torah, they are hooked. Thus, in Columbus, Ohio, after a summer of SEED, a community member mused, “We never knew how good it could be.” Two years later, a *kollel* was born in America’s heartland. Mr. Shulman also notes that in a lot of communities, students are forced to end their Jewish education upon graduating from the local day school. This changes once a *kollel* is brought in. New vistas are opened and oftentimes, boys’ and girls’ high schools are established.

“The magic of SEED is that *bachurim* are not threatening,” says Mr. Shulman. “People don’t think their lives are going to be changed. They come, at the outset, believing it will be over on Labor Day. Little do they know that the Torah

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



Rav Binyamin Blau, rosh kollel of Torat Tzion Kollel of Cleveland, learns with students in the beit midrash.

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.¹²

The dreams of Reb Yisrael, the Netziv and Reb Aharon have come true. Young men are continuing their studies after the *chupah* and enhancing their stature 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* every place that Jews live.”¹³ 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. **IA**

Notes

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1. Norman F. Cantor, *The Sacred Chain: The History of the Jews* (New York, 1994), 226.

2. See Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, *The Jewish Press*, 15 September 1995, 74.

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 Reuvein 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*.

5. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Shemittah* and *Yovel* 13:13.

6. Commentaries to Shemot 16:32; Tehillim 127:4; *Temurah* 16a.

7. *Tashbetz* 1:147.

8. *Iggerot Moshe, Yoreh Deah* vol. 2, no. 116. (p. 190). See, also, *Biur Halachah* 156 s.v., *sofa beteilah*.

9. Rabbi Dov Katz, *Tenuot HaMusar*, (Israel, 1974), 3:21.

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.

12. *Hamodia*, 5 January 2001, 86.

13. *Leket Reshimot* (Lakewood, 1999), 136.