



SPOTLIGHT

A FOCUS ON LIFE IN KOLLEL KESSER TORAH





THE MASHGIACH RUCHANI'S INSIDE VIEW

It is a typical afternoon in the *bais medrash* of Kollel Keser Torah in Kiryat Sefer. The room echoes with voices raised in passionate debate, as the *avreichim* toil over the day's *Gemara*, immersed as always in the Talmudic sea.

The absence of one *avreich* is barely noticeable in the deafening din, but one of the kollel members has slipped out of the room. When he returns, another *avreich* is ushered out in his place. A third *yungerman* patiently waits his turn, knowing that he is next on the list.

These *avreichim* have registered in advance for private meetings with Rav Yosef Elefant, a *mashgiach ruchani* of sorts in the kollel, who has been delivering regular *shmuessen* for the past few years. Rav Elefant was recruited to be more than just a visiting speaker; he arrives about an hour before his scheduled *shmuess* every week to meet with the *avreichim* individually. The men sign up in advance with Reb Avraham Bamberger, a member of the kollel who is responsible for Rav Elefant's schedule, and meet with him in the kollel's office, where a table laden with refreshments and hot drinks fosters a relaxing atmosphere. Rav Elefant makes himself available to advise

the *avreichim* on any issue of concern to them, whether it pertains to *chinuch*, *shalom bayis*, financial matters, or any other decisions they must make. Over the years, the entire kollel has certainly benefited from his piercing insight and sound counsel.

"It was a gradual process," says Rav Elefant, who is perhaps best known for his position as a *maggid shiur* in Yeshivas Mir for the past thirty years. "The goal of bringing me to the kollel was to give the *avreichim* someone to talk to, to give them an opportunity to share their concerns and

struggles with someone who could advise them. During the first year, I probably came only four times altogether, but it increased over time. I have built up a connection with the *avreichim*, and they talk to me about every issue in their lives."

With his unique perspective on the kollel, Rav Elefant is able to attest to its remarkable character. "I consider the kollel unique because of the quality both of the *cheftza*, meaning the kollel itself, and the *gavra*, the members of the kollel," he asserts, borrowing some classical *lomdus*

terminology to describe his impressions. “All the *avreichim* live on a very high level. They have enormous aspirations for spiritual growth, and the sacrifices they have made for Torah are utterly astonishing.”

Rav Elefant reveals that many of the members of the kollel live under extraordinary financial pressure. “For many of them, *parnossah* is extremely difficult. They live on shoestring budgets or under difficult conditions, but none of that inhibits them from learning with enormous joy.” And as the *mashgiach ruchani*, he can attest that in spite of their oppressive material situations, the *avreichim* remain focused on spirituality. While one might expect them to be consulting

“It is a tremendous, incredible group of guys,” Rav Elefant marvels. “They are driven by a powerful desire to grow. This is clear both from the way they speak to me and the way they attend the *shmuessen*.”

As a *rebbe* in Yeshivas Mir, with its thousands of *bochurim* and *yungerleit*, Rav Elefant certainly must have encountered many different situations over the course of his career. But somehow, Kollel Keser Torah never ceases to astound him. “When the *yungerleit* talk to me about financial issues, I am absolutely amazed by the budgets that some of them live on,” he said. “There are a few of them whose wives have jobs that pay decently, but most live on extremely tight budgets. Their ability

ication to his *talmidim* makes him, in the *mashgiach’s* words, “*chad b’dara*”—unparalleled in this generation. While the *mashgiach* prefers to keep the details confidential, he attests that Rav Abramov constantly places himself at the disposal of his *avreichim*, investing almost superhuman effort in providing for their needs. “Whenever an *avreich* has personal issues and is in need of help, he makes himself available to help them and their families,” Rav Elefant says. “He offers them support of many kinds, including boosting their morale. His heart is always open to the *avreichim*, and his love for them is simply off the charts.”

Of course, Rav Elefant’s very presence in the kollel is itself a novelty. It is difficult to find a kollel where a *maggid shiur* from outside the institution



him about prosaic issues such as how to deal with various financial needs or how to cope with their limited resources, he reveals that most of their questions actually concern how to further their spiritual growth.

to content themselves with the bare minimum is utterly extraordinary.”

Rav Elefant is equally impressed by Rav Abramov, the *rosh kollel*, whose supreme ded-

is brought in regularly to deliver *shmuessen*, and the concept of a kollel employing a *rav* to offer advice to the *avreichim* is highly unusual. “This is an experiment,” he explains, “but it seems to be very successful.” Perhaps that is owed in part to the

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unique characters of the *avreichim* themselves. “I have rarely encountered such a group of *bnei aliyah*, of people who strive to grow and yearn to build beautiful *Torahdik* families, to

shteig in learning, and to climb to incredible heights of *kedushah*.”

Rav Elefant’s weekly *shmuessen* alternate between two different topics: the weekly *parshah* and *chinuch habanim*. On the weeks when he discusses child rearing, the tables in the *bais medrash* are brought together so that the *avreichim* can sit around them, thereby creating a more casual and comfortable environment. And the impact of his *shmuessen* has been unmistakable; the *yungerleit* treasure their connections with their *mashgiach* and have benefited immensely from his counsel.

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It has been a few years since Rav Abramov first contacted Rav Yosef Elefant and invited him to take this position in the kollel. The famous Mirrer *maggid shiur* has already become a familiar sight

in the *bais medrash* of Keser Torah, and one conclusion is inescapable: If his presence in the kollel was an “experiment,” then it is time to declare the experiment a success!

A NEW START IN ERETZ YISRAEL



Years ago, if you had asked Mrs. Yehudis Moskowitz where she envisioned herself spending her adult life, she would have scoffed at the idea that she might one day raise a family in Eretz Yisrael. The eighth child in a large family living in Gateshead, Mrs. Moskowitz would never have dreamed of uprooting herself from her native England and traveling across the ocean to settle in a foreign country, far from her parents and her many siblings. Today, however, the mother of nine lives with her family in Kiryat Sefer, where her husband Avraham, also English-born, is a proud student in Kollel Keser Torah. And she cannot imagine living any other way—or anywhere else in the world.

Transplanted to Kiryat Sefer

It all began when Mrs. Moskowitz met her husband in England nearly two decades ago. Having learned in Yerushalayim as a bochur, Avraham felt strongly that he wished to continue his studies in a kollel in Eretz Yisrael rather than remaining in England. Although she was reluctant to leave her family behind, Mrs. Moskowitz agreed to give it a try. They have been in Israel ever since.

The couple first settled in Yerushalayim, but the rising cost of rent quickly drove them out of the city. They moved to Kiryat Sefer, and Avraham continued commuting to kollel in Yerushalayim for several years. As their family grew, however, it became increasingly evident that he would have to find a place to learn that was closer to home. “When we had four little boys, his mashgiach told him that

his family would be needing him and that he should relocate to a kollel in Kiryat Sefer,” Mrs. Moskowitz recalls. To this day, she marveled at the hashgochah pratis that shaped his next move: Kollel Keser Torah, which was still in its infancy at the time, had been established in a bais medrash not far from their home. Today, its bustling headquarters are still located at a short distance from the Moskowitz family’s apartment. “The siyata d’shmaya is so incredible,” she says with profound emotion. “Here we are, living just a short distance from the kollel where my husband is truly thriving. I am so happy that we have the privilege of being part of this special kollel and community.”

Not Just a Number

Reb Avraham Moskowitz joined a chaburah in Keser Torah that consisted entirely of



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“chutznikim”—English-speaking avreichim who hailed from other countries. This group is a subdivision of the much larger kollel, which consists of nearly 200 avreichim. But in spite of the large number of men in the kollel, Mrs. Moskowitz asserts that no one feels lost in the crowd. “The rosh kollel knows everyone personally, and there is a very strong sense of family among the avreichim,” she attests. “No one feels that they are just a number; the rosh kollel is there for every individual and monitors the needs of every family.” Ten years after her husband joined Keser Torah, Mrs. Moskowitz still sounds euphoric. “My husband is deeply content in the kollel and has a tremendous sense of accomplishment, and our entire family thrives on it. The thought of returning to chutz laaretz is the farthest thing from our minds today.”

For Mrs. Moskowitz, the warm bond shared by the kollel families is particularly important. With the majority of her family still overseas (with the exception of one brother who has lived in a different city in Israel for many years, and another who made the move to Israel just this past summer), she has spent the past decade and a half without the company of her actual family. That void has been largely filled by the other members of the Keser Torah community.

“There is a genuine sense of camaraderie and togetherness among the members of my husband’s chaburah,” she relates. As a group of foreign immigrants, she adds, these avreichim and their families may even have a greater sense of cohesion than their Israeli counterparts. She also marvels at the warmth and emotional support provided to the families by the rosh kollel and his wife. “Rav Yechezkel

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learning, whether it is emotional, physical, or monetary help. He has a personal relationship with every member of the kollel, and he never stops giving. He distributes honey and meat to the avreichim before Rosh Hashanah, and chicken and meat before Pesach. He provides lunches during Chanukah so that the men can remain in kollel throughout the afternoon until candle lighting. And no matter how much he does, it seems that it is never enough for him; he is constantly on the lookout for more ways to benefit the avreichim.”

She adds that the rosh kollel is a man of action, who responds to every need as soon as it arises. “He once found out that a certain avreich in the kollel was struggling financially to the point that he couldn’t afford a loaf of bread that day,” she recalls. “As soon as he found out about it, he hurried to the bakery, purchased bread for the

Gifts of Encouragement

The personal connection that is one of the hallmarks of Kollel Keser Torah extends not only to the avreichim but to their families as well. The wives and children of the avreichim are invited to a simchas beis hashoevah program every Sukkos, which is a highly inspiring event for the entire family. The kollel arranges special learning programs and events, complete with exciting prizes, for the avreichim’s children in order to encourage their personal learning as well. For the women, the kollel runs a special program known as Eishes Melech, which organizes events that boost their inspiration and emotional resolve to continue supporting their husbands’ Torah learning.

“If you saw my living room, you would be amazed at the array of heartwarming gifts from the kollel that are on display,” Mrs. Moskowitz



Abramov is here for everyone, exactly like a caring father. He will provide anything that an avreich needs in order to grow in

family, and delivered it directly to his door.”

says with pronounced emotion. “There is a gold eishes chayil sign that I received at an Eishes Melech event, and a silver tzedakah box that



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was given to us on another occasion. I also have a leatherbound siddur inscribed with my name, and many more beautiful things that were given to us as signs of recognition. When the kollel makes a siyum, the women receive exquisite gifts. That appreciation gives us the chizuk we need in order to continue our work in our households, and we derive real strength from the recognition of our efforts.”

Mrs. Moskowitz also emphasizes the impact on the family of the kollel’s Toraso B’Yado program, in which the chiddushim of the avreichim are compiled into printed sefarim. “Every year, the kollel puts out widely distributed seforim that contain articles written by all the avreichim,” she explains. “In addition, the kollel employs typists who organize the notes or writings of individual avreichim into actual seforim. My husband has produced several seforim in this way, and we received several volumes for ourselves and our extended family members. This brings me loads of chizuk and inspiration,” she asserts. Beyond the emotional support offered to the women of the kollel, Keser Torah has also organized a special program that provides practical assistance of many kinds whenever the need arises. Chen V’Chessed is a highly efficient internal program that provides meals, cleaning help, and other forms of assistance to women who are convalescing after birth or otherwise unable to care for their homes. The organization’s work is discreet; the identities

of the recipients are kept confidential, and the costs are covered completely by the kollel.

Mrs. Moskowitz adds that the women of the kollel also benefit from their relationship with the rosh kollel’s wife. “Mrs. Abramov is an absolutely amazing person,” she declares with great feeling. “She is so down to earth, so normal, and always so happy and cheerful. Her husband is often away for two or three weeks in any given month, and she is left to shoulder the burden of her household concerns on her own, but she is always calm and in good spirits.” According to Mrs. Moskowitz, the rebbetzin’s personal example plays an enormous role in reassuring and invigorating the women of the community. “I look at her and say, ‘If she can do that, then I can certainly do my job.’ In a way, she supports all of us,” she concludes.

Making It Work

The life of a kollel family is often accompanied by struggles of all kinds. Perhaps the most prevalent among them is the financial hardship that stems from a minimal income. “As the family grows, this can be challenging, especially for someone from chutz la’aretz,” she declares. “I am not made of the same stuff as Israelis, and I don’t necessarily have the resilience to copy their lifestyle. Nevertheless, I am committed to doing what it takes to help my husband remain in kollel.” Today, she works for three hours a day for an insurance company in England.

“The advantage is that I get to work English hours, which means that I am in my office from 12:00 until 3:00 in the afternoon. The disadvantage,” she adds with a wry chuckle, “is that I am not receiving an English salary.” The family has certainly had to learn to make do with minimal material resources, but Mrs. Moskowitz embraces that mesirus nefesh. “We have no choice but to make sacrifices and to struggle in order to lead this life, but it is well worth it,” she asserts. “If we added up the numbers, we would probably see that it doesn’t even make sense that we are still afloat. But we have seen major siyata d’shmaya in our lives. Hashem provides

for us, even if the calculations don’t make sense.”

For her family in England, her acceptance of their financial situation is sometimes bewildering. “My father once came to visit us and saw that the only chairs we had in our house were simple plastic ones,” she relates. “He looked perturbed and asked, ‘Do you need me to buy you some chairs?’ I assured him that our chairs were perfect for our needs. What could be wrong with plastic chairs? They are easy to clean and inexpensive enough that we don’t have to worry about breaking them! We have simply learned to have a very practical perspective.”



Perhaps even more impressive than the chairs is the fact that the Moskowitzes somehow managed to raise their growing family for years in a cramped two-bedroom apartment. Eventually, they were able to expand the apartment—by adding a third bedroom. Even after that addition, their home is hardly spacious by any standard. But Mrs. Moskowitz appreciates the beauty of a simple lifestyle. “One of our neighbors once felt that she had to apologize for doing construction to add a room to her apartment,” she recalls. “As an Israeli, she had grown up along with nine siblings in an apartment with only a bedroom and a half. To us, with our foreign upbringing, it was clear that the living

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space in our apartments wasn’t large enough. In fact, our families always ask how we are able to live this way. But what we have learned,” she concludes, “is that regardless of how much or how little you have, you can always make it work.”

The Stresses of COVID

As challenging as their lives have always been, the coronavirus crisis amplified their struggles enormously. Suddenly, the whole

family was essentially confined to their home, and Reb Avraham struggled to maintain an appropriate learning schedule with all of his children underfoot. For Mrs. Moskowitz, the pain of separation from her family became even more acute, as it was no longer merely difficult to visit her siblings, who had reached the stage of marrying off children and were celebrating simchos without her; due to the travel restrictions, it had become completely impossible. And thanks to the restrictions on travel within the country, even the one sibling who lived in Eretz Yisrael was now out of her reach. But beyond that emotional hardship, there was also the practical challenge of going on with their everyday lives under the new and distressing circumstances.

As always, Kollel Keser Torah was ready to support its avreichim in every way possible, and Rav Abramov was quick to adapt to the unusual situation. “He created a schedule that was suited for avreichim with large families who were learning at home,” Mrs. Moskowitz recalls. “The requirement was for each avreich to learn every day for three periods of two hours each. It was really perfect for our situation; my husband learned from 9:30 until 11:30 in the morning, then from 4:00 to 6:00 in the afternoon, and then again for another two hours at night. After each seder was over, he emerged from his locked bedroom and relieved me of the duty of caring for the children. It was genuinely amazing; I wouldn’t have been able to cope otherwise.”

Of course, Rav Abramov also did not allow the kollel’s regular events, which contribute so much to the families’ sense of inspiration and



bonding, to be forgotten this year. Although the regular simchas beis hashoevah could not be held this Sukkos, for instance, he made sure that gifts were delivered to the children in order to ensure that the festivity of the holiday would still be felt.

The Essence of Life

When asked how the kollel has impacted her life, Mrs. Moskowitz has a simple yet incredibly meaningful answer: “It hasn’t just impacted my life. It is my life.”

For the entire family, life itself is defined by the kollel and Reb Avraham’s learning. The daily routine in the Moskowitz household revolves around Reb Avraham’s kollel schedule, and the children are keenly aware of the centrality of Torah learning in his life. “Every morning,” Mrs. Moskowitz explains, “they see that he has to get ready to leave on time for kollel, and that the entire morning routine revolves around that. When he is preparing a chaburah, they see him staying up late at night and getting up early in the morning in order to spend extra hours organizing the material. They see the effort he invests and how much it means to him, and they have definitely internalized those values.”

Mrs. Moskowitz’s life may have taken her on an unexpected journey, but she has no regrets. Her husband’s kollel has shaped her family’s lives in innumerable ways, large and small. It has cushioned her throughout the vicissitudes of a life lived far from her family, and it has filled her home with joy and satisfaction. As challenging as this journey may have been,