

Rav Yitzchak Berkovits, shlita has dedicated most of the last decade to realizing his vision of synthesizing the time-honored, intensive approach to kollel studies, alongside training his kollel members for careers in kiruv. As such he is viewed as a mentor and role model by followers of both approaches. Rav Berkovits is also a “mara d’asra,” rabbinical leader, in Jerusalem’s Sanhedria Murchevet neighborhood to a dedicated group of kollel yungeleit who have found their foothold in Eretz Yisrael. To gain a deeper understanding of how Rav Berkovits leads his flocks on these multiple levels, *Mishpacha’s* Binyamin Rose visited Rav Berkovits’ Jerusalem Kollel, and afterwards, sat down to a rare one-on-one conversation. Rav Berkovits shared his hashkafah on limud HaTorah, the role of kiruv today, how to make one’s yishuv in Eretz Yisrael a success, and some guidance on an issue that almost every avreich faces, at some time or another: that is, whether to continue full-time learning, go into kiruv, or to find work. What factors must be taken into account before making that critical decision?



Photos: Yehuda Boltshauser

Learning to CARE

A Sichas HaChag With Rav Yitzchak Berkovits, Shlita

Binyamin Rose

When I was asked to arrive at the Jerusalem Kollel at 2 p.m. for the daily *hashkafah shiur* of Rav Yitzchak Berkovits, my first thought was that there must have been some mistake in the timing. Normally, 2 p.m. is the middle of the two- or three-hour afternoon break in the routine kollel schedule. But after my arrival, and a warm welcome by several of the *avreichim* who showed me to an open seat in this comfortable but unpretentious *beis medrash*, I realized I was witnessing something uncommon.

“I never found the long *bein hasedarim* in the middle of the day to be all that constructive,” explained Rav Berkovits after we retired to his private office in the back of the *beis medrash* at the conclusion of that day’s *shiur*. The Jerusalem Kollel, which opened eight years ago, takes only a forty-five-minute break for lunch at 1 p.m. *Avreichim* return for Minchah Gedolah at 1:45 and their day ends at 6 p.m. so they can have more time with their families in the early evening. With



that schedule, explains Rav Berkovits, *avreichim* who want to hold down a full night seder can also do so without having to run in and out of the house. “We originally voted on this schedule and we are very happy with it.”

Rav Berkovits raised a thought-provoking question at the start of the *shiur*, which may well represent the essence of his kollel. When Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu to appoint Yehoshua bin Nun as his successor, He told Moshe to place his hand on Yehoshua, and the Torah relates that Moshe placed both hands on Yehoshua. Why did Hashem only ask Moshe to use one hand and why did Moshe use both? Rav Berkovits answered that Hashem wanted Moshe, of his own volition, to lay the second hand to demonstrate that when one teaches Torah, he is not only a conduit for passing on the *mesorah* of Torah, but he is giving of himself to his talmidim. “The *ikar* [principle] role of *rebbeim* today is to attain *k’ilu yoldo* [to view your *talmidim* as if you gave birth to them]. And how does one prepare himself for that role? Simply learn to care about people.”

Rav Berkovits, who grew up in the Brownsville and Boro Park sections of Brooklyn, gives a great deal of credit and *kavod* to his mother, an Auschwitz survivor, who instilled in him both *emunah* in Hashem and a thirst for kiruv. “The idea of kiruv was always something dear to me. My mother especially believed in it. She was very vocal about her *emunah*. She would speak to people at work about Yiddishkeit and about being proud of it. That was very much part of our upbringing.” Rav Berkovits translated that into action, initially in the sixteen years he spent as *menahel ruchani* at Aish HaTorah, where he was second in command to Rav Noach Weinberg, *ztz”l*. During that period, Aish grew into one of the world’s largest and most successful kiruv yeshivos. Much of what he learned there helped form the methodologies employed at his own Jerusalem Kollel.

In addition to being *rav* of his *kehillah* in Sanhedria Murchevet, Rav Berkovits is known to the Orthodox world at-large as coauthor of the *Chofetz Chaim: A Lesson a Day* on the laws of *lashon hara*, a book that almost every Torah Jew has reviewed at one time or

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another. He also delivers the daily Mishnah Berurah *shiur* for the Chofetz Chaim Heritage Foundation and many other classes of his have been recorded over the years. Some ten years ago, he initiated the Linas HaTzedek: Center for Jewish Values kollel, which disseminates the Torah’s guidelines for *bein adam l’chaveiro*, interpersonal relations. If our Sages tell us that the Second Beis HaMikdash was destroyed because of baseless hatred, surely the way forward to rebuilding the Third Beis HaMikdash, which will stand forever, is to rectify the damage that has been done.

What impact would the Rav say the Linas HaTzedek program has had on people?

“The Linas HaTzedek curriculum is also part of the Jerusalem Kollel schedule on Fridays,” says Rav Berkovits. “It started when two accomplished *yeshivahleit*, Rabbis Tzvi Muller and Pesach Freedman, sat in on some classes of mine in Aish and were inspired to start a kollel to learn the *sugyas* of *bein adam l’chaveiro* in detail. We started with a group of twelve really serious *yeshivahleit*, and eventually put out seven volumes of *mareh mekomos*. Of those twelve *yeshivahleit*, several became *roshei kollel* themselves. We now have about thirteen Linas HaTzedek programs both here in Eretz Yisrael and in *chutz l’Aretz*, known as the Center for Jewish Values.



“My feeling is that *bein adam l’chaveiro* is really crucial to becoming a *ben aliyah*, and central to being a servant of Hashem. I also believe it is a bridge to the less-knowledgeable and the unaffiliated Jew. Several times a year, the kollel hosts groups of beginners from *chutz l’Aretz* and it is so much easier for them to study a *sugya bein adam l’chaveiro* then attempting to learn something that’s foreign to them. These are concepts they’ve thought about already and then when exposed to the Torah perspective, they are blown away. We’ve had beginners who after a few days of learning ask if they could join the kollel! They also see how Torah study affects them as human beings.”

The Rav himself made a major change after learning full-time in the Mir for ten years. What prompted your personal decision to go from full-time learning to teaching and kiruv?

“I was sitting and learning in the Mir, and one day, I got a message that Rebbetzin Weinberg (Rav Noach’s wife) wanted to speak with me. I had read about Rav Noach, but this was my first encounter with the Rebbetzin. In what I later learned was typical Rebbetzin Weinberg fashion, she simply declared, ‘I’m opening a seminary [EYAHT]; you’re teaching halachah there. Now let’s discuss your hours.’ Through EYAHT, they sent me a very impressive group of Aish students to learn with. I really felt like I wanted to give to these people who were so thirsty for *emes*. Afterwards I was told they called this ‘the bait,’ and it was very effective. That’s how I got to Aish.”

What do you feel are the most important aspects of kiruv you learned from Rav Noach that you carry over to your activities today?

“I really saw the state of Klal Yisrael in a very real and candid way. There was a conversation I had with Rav Noach, *ztz”l*, many times, and that was: what is the greatest issue facing Klal Yisrael today, the state of non-*frum* Jewry or the state of *frum* Jewry? He would say it is the state of *frum* Jewry, but if we could get every *frum* Jew to do kiruv, we’d save them. There are many concepts that would be reinforced by involving the *frum* in kiruv including *emunah*, *bein adam l’chaveiro*, integrity, and so many more. These are all concepts that I attempt to share with the *avreichim* here.

“The goal in Aish was to try and produce an army of *mekarvim* who would get out and fight for the survival of Klal Yisrael, and turn the tide on intermarriage. The issue of when to tell a beginner to leave the *beis medrash* to do kiruv was complicated. Rav Noach said to send them out before they lost their idealism and Rav Noach was right. No one has enthusiasm like a fresh beginner. The down side, though, is denying the beginner the right to advancing his own learning. For the beginner, to learn how to learn Gemara takes years. At Aish, we were always looking for new innovations, trying to get people to grow more quickly. Nothing ever satisfied Rav

“On the whole, there is so much talent in the yeshivah world that ends up going dormant because people end up leaving the yeshivah and end up not using that talent. It’s so heartbreaking ... If you’re still learning day and night, grow and be as big as you can. But anyone who’s thinking of leaving, how can you think of anything but fighting for kavod Shamayim?”



Noach. He would regularly demand that we develop a program that could take them from the street to being rabbis in six months.”

Is your entire Jerusalem Kollel being trained to do kiruv?

“That is the concept. I was in Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel’s very first Friday *chaburah* in the Mir and asked him for a brachah upon opening the kollel. Rav Nosson Tzvi said, ‘Just be sure you don’t take anyone too early.’ While you don’t want to take people that are already burned out, you certainly don’t want to distract those who are *shtieging* away and growing more. Why deny them and Klal Yisrael the right to grow further? We insist that an *avreich* consult with his *rebbe* before joining the kollel.

“It began almost as a one-man show with a handful of *talmidim*. Today the kollel has an administrative staff consisting of Rav Yaakov Blackman and Rabbi Josh Boretsky, several *roshei chaburah*, and *mashivim*. We have well over 100 couples placed in kiruv and *rabbanus* all over the world — all over North America, in the UK, South Africa, and then we’ve got some in Berlin and even two Spanish-speaking students in South America.”

What are the early warning signs that might signal to an *avreich* that it may be time to move on and how do you make that assessment? At the same time, what are the various options one should consider?

“It’s when you see the first signs of it not being what it used to

be. You’re not on fire the way you used to be, and you see a serious slacking off in your learning. The whole family can see it. When one looks around the kollel world, we find there are those who can sit and learn year after year, going thru *masechta* after *masechta* and grow to become very big. If they’re really good, they may begin saying a *shiur* or running a *chaburah*, but this accounts for a small percentage of the kollel world. What happens to most is that there comes a certain point where they’re just not on fire anymore. They start slacking off. Some are burned out. When an *avreich* begins to burn out, it’s time for the next step, which is to give. Some go into *chinuch*. But the kollel world is, baruch Hashem, so big — there just aren’t enough positions. Everyone wants to teach Gemara and be a *mesivta rebbi*, or at least be an eighth-grade *rebbe*, but how many positions are there? So what happens? Generally they sort of give up, and drift into a profession or business, and consider themselves failures because they didn’t make it. Some become good *yeshivishe balabatim*, but many don’t.

“So what you end up having is fine *talmidei chachamim*, talented, idealistic, but burned out. It is evident in terms of what the home looks like. Everything’s half asleep. At the same time, Klal Yisrael is falling apart. Intermarriage in America — where are we holding now — at 65 percent or more? Why shouldn’t these people take their talents, take their Torah, and be an influence on other Jews? There is so much talent in the yeshivah world that ends up going dormant because people end up leaving the yeshivah and



“The problem of saying that you’re staying in Eretz Yisrael because of *mesirus nefesh* is you feel that you’re doing Hashem a favor. That means it’s constantly going on the bill and one day you’re going to have to pay for it. People have to love Eretz Yisrael”

end up not using that talent. It’s so heartbreaking because Klal Yisrael really needs people out there. If you’re still learning day and night, grow and be as big as you can. But anyone who’s thinking of leaving, how can you think of anything *but* fighting for *kavod Shamayim*?” [Ed. — Of course this assessment should be done with one’s *daas Torah*, so one must consult with his *rosh kollel* or *rosh yeshivah* before making such a life-altering decision.]

Don’t most *avreichim* leave kollel for *parnassah* reasons?

“When someone is dishonest with himself it’s so clear. Everyone assumes a lot of people leave kollel because of *parnassah*. I have a *chaver* who would often say, ‘They didn’t have *parnassah* two years ago either, so what’s changed? When you’re on fire, you call it *mesirus nefesh*. When you’re falling asleep you call it a *parnassah* issue.’”

Do you feel you have been successful in finding the correct balance between training *avreichim* to be both *talmidei chachamim* and capable of doing kiruv so that one does not detract from the other?

“There is no question that what is valued most in the yeshivah world is being a *lamdan*, knowing how to learn. There generally comes a point that a *ben Torah* reaches where he matures and realizes the importance of retaining his learning. It is so important to impress upon *bnei Torah* the importance of learning to know. Because our program is meant for people going out as *rabbanim*

and *mashpi'im*, it must include a very strong halachah component. We do not approach the study of halachah in a superficial way. We do, however, insist that one be accountable for knowing what he has studied. Perhaps the most important value we convey in preparation for kiruv is maturity — maturity in learning and in every aspect of one’s *avodas Hashem*.”

How does this manifest itself? What sort of issues do you work on?

“There is a very strong *hashkafah* component. That involves honest discussion of one’s relationship with Hashem; his own davening and learning; his attitude towards others, including those who start up with him. There is an emphasis on *middos* development, on self-respect, on integrity. On dealing with anger, tension, and impatience. *Shalom bayis* and *chinuch*. Establishing priorities and defining responsibilities within one’s community. And, of course, one’s responsibility for Klal Yisrael.”

How does your *kehillah* itself contribute to the kollel and vice-versa?

“It’s almost like two ethnic groups. The *kehillah* has hard-core *yeshivahleit*, in full swing; guys learning day and night and every Erev Shabbos and Erev Yom Tov. It’s beautiful. This is not a community of burn-outers or people who came here for a vacation.”

Do you have *balabatim*?

“A handful, and they’re welcome and made to feel welcome. The *kehillah*, as I see it, is a *kehillah* of people who are *bnei aliyah*, who want to grow, and I see it as my privilege to have input into the growth.”

Being that interpersonal relations is a major focus, today, we lead such stressful lives, rushing from place to place and we tend to think about ourselves first? What’s the cure?

“First, I don’t let the community get away with it. People are constantly being reminded of their responsibility to everyone else and it’s clear to me that they’re waiting to be told. We have *mussar*

groups and a weekly *vaad* on *chinuch*. Over the years, we’ve worked on the *sheish mitzvos t’midiyos* [six constant mitzvos] and we are currently doing the *mem-ches devarim sh’Torah nikenis mehem* [the forty-eight ways of acquiring the Torah from *Pirkei Avos*]. Our people know that the same way you ask a *sheilah* in *basar b’chalah* you ask a *sheilah bein adam l’chaveiro*. The standards of kashrus of your money cannot be any lower than the standard of kashrus of your food. They understood that they came to Yerushalayim to be bigger people. They could have learned elsewhere. There’s something about Yerushalayim. It’s bigger and I see that it’s my responsibility that the community provides for them and we provide an outline of how to grow and help develop them as Jews.”

When I came to Eretz Yisrael, Rav Nachman Bulman, ztz”l, advised our family to start with an American *kehillah*, but one whose goal was to mainstream us into Israeli chareidi society? Is that your goal too?

“Absolutely. There’s no question that anyone who comes here and wants to remain a *chutznik* is going to create a problem for himself and more importantly, for his children. You can’t create misfits and you can’t bring up a generation that doesn’t know where it belongs. But even more fundamentally, the reason you came here was to acquire the values of Eretz Yisrael, so why fight them.”

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How would you describe those values?

“The values of Yerushalayim and the values of Eretz Yisrael, are primarily that *gashmiyus* is a low priority. It’s nice, but you don’t make life decisions on the basis of *gashmiyus*. You raise your children in a way that you can satisfy them with the *egozim* of Chazal at the Seder and not have to promise them the latest electronic toys; that you can have five kids sleeping in a room and find space for guests with the kids arguing over who gets to sleep under the table.

“There are some cultural differences that are more difficult to accept. Obviously we feel more comfortable with Western manners, so it is important to bring our kids up with Western manners but with the values of Eretz Yisrael. I see very clearly that

parents who do that are very successful with their children. Those who don’t, end up raising kids with Middle Eastern manners and Western values.”

What about schooling? The prevailing notion is that there are few choices, especially for girls, and the rules for admission can be cumbersome?

“It’s very tricky. It’s very important to learn the system and understand it. If you want to stay naive and stay outside the system, the children will suffer. You can’t remain an outsider.”

How do you do that?

“By being accepting and not stubborn and critical. You must buy into the values and let go of the *chutznik* standards of *gashmiyus*.”

Sanhedria Murchevet has become an especially expensive neighborhood. How easy is it to forgo *gashmiyus*, especially considering the high cost of housing?

“We have fought to keep it as inexpensive as it can be, but if you’re going to bring that up, I have made it clear to the *kehillah* that I don’t accept rent control for economic reasons. Prices are set by supply and demand, and I don’t see that we as a community have the right to deny the locals the right to make money because of our presence. The idea of rent control was to maintain a *kehillah* of people who come from more modest families who really can’t afford more. The flavor of our community is a lot different than others five minutes away from here. People lead much simpler lives and prefer Yerushalayim values to those of where they came from.”

Does the Rav see a conflict, on one hand, of promoting *yishuv* Eretz Yisrael and its values, and on the other hand, preparing young families to do *kiruv* in *chutz l’Aretz*?

“I say very clearly, a Jew belongs here. The only justification I can see for a Jew to leave Eretz Yisrael is to save Jews, and I make this very clear to the *kehillah*. I do encourage aliyah very strongly and 25 percent of the *kehillah*, maybe closing in on 30 percent, now keeps one day of Yom Tov. The only reason to leave is to be *mekarev* Jews. But here and there, sometimes it is not *shayach* to remain. Some women miss their families to the point that one just cannot insist on their remaining here. We try to make everyone feel at home but it’s not always possible.”

People sometimes come to Eretz Yisrael for one, two, or three years before facing the question of whether they should continue to be *moser nefesh* to stay or to return?

“The problem of referring to it as *mesirus nefesh* is that you feel that you’re doing Hashem a favor. People have to love Eretz Yisrael. They have to appreciate that the standards of learning and *chesed* here are so much higher than in *chutz l’Aretz*. There are people here walking around with old, dusty hats who know *Shas*. Whatever is missing here is trivial when measured against what we do have.”

Hillel taught his questioner all of the Torah while standing on one leg, and that was to love another Jew as oneself. Can the Rav give us one brief tip to help us with our *bein adam l’chaveiro* in these very trying times?

“It’s very simple. Stop being self-centered and see how much bigger the world is than yourself. Creep out of your little subjective box and get to see the truth is bigger than you alone.”

What special thought would the Rav like to share for our readers for Shavuos?

“Hashem gave the Torah to all of Klal Yisrael. If you really love Torah, share it.” ■