

# THE TORAH REVOLUTION IN THE FSU:

by *BY YISRAEL HERSHKOWITZ*



Members of the Kollel from Ukraine, at a special conference on the famous Patiomkin steps.

Students eagerly making notes in a shiur.



Rabbi Bentzy Lipsker, Kollel chairman.



## Reb Oleg Goes to Kollel

It began with a spontaneous idea. Shluchim Rabbi Moshe Weber and Rabbi Bentzion Lipsker has spent years working to bring Jews closer to Judaism when they had a revolutionary idea: Even though these are Jews who know nothing about their heritage, they would take them one step further. In addition to conversations about eating matzah and lighting Chanukah candles, they would draw those who hardly know anything about Torah and Yiddishkeit into the sugya \* Since then, lots of water has flowed down the Dneiper. The Kollel Torah network numbers 7,000 men, learning in no less than 250 koellelim throughout the former Soviet Union and a number of European countries. In the merit of their learning, they become closer to Yiddishkeit, and many are no different to their contemporaries in Bnei Brak and Modiin, both in what they have learned, and in their diligence and love of Torah. \*What about corona? It just strengthened the activities, which suddenly became global

By Yisrael Hershkowitz

The scene that met my eyes was heartening: a packed kollel. Seated at the shtender were *avreichim*, their foreheads creased in concentration as they delved into the *Shaagas Aryeh*, trying to understand the *mehalech* in the *sugya* that they are learning now — “*shnayim ochazim b’tallis*” in *Bava Metzia*. The tables were piled with *sefarim*, with the ubiquitous coffee cups rounding out the picture.

In a quiet corner, there’s a stormy argument going on. The *rosh kollel* is trying to explain, but the young man he is arguing with refuses to accept the explanation. The tones rise, and the argument is getting more heated.

It would seem to be a typical scene. Any *kollel* or *beis medrash* you enter will provide similar scenes, whether it is in Yerushalayim or Bnei Brak, Ashdod or Tifrach, Lakewood or London. *Baruch Hashem*, there are many such places in Am Yisrael, and these scenes are part of the experience.

So what is different here? When listening a bit closer, an observer would notice the Russian language interspersed with the tune regular *Gemara* singsong. This is what attracts attention and makes it clear that something unusual is happening here. Thus, even if we tell you that this *kollel* is only one of a network that numbers no less than 250 *kollelim*, in which 7000 *avreichim* study, you won’t be that impressed. After all, a similar — if not greater — number of *avreichim* learns in Rav Sorotzkin’s *kollel* network in Eretz Yisrael...

But take note of this additional detail, that may fill in some more information — and might lead to some raised eyebrows. This *kollel* is located in a rather small city, somewhere in Western Ukraine. The *avreichim* who study there — who are clearly immersed in their learning — did not even know what a *kollel* was two years ago. And now they are delving like regulars into the *Shaagas Aryeh*, after they toiled to understand the *Tosafos*. It wasn’t that long ago that they also didn’t know what *parashah* it was, and some didn’t even know what Hebrew letters looked like.

“Isn’t this real *nachas*?” beams Rabbi Moshe Weber, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *shaliach* in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. He established this massive *kollel* network with his colleague, Rabbi Bentzy Lipsker, the *shaliach* in St. Petersburg, Russia.

“Suddenly, we are being faced with questions of a different kind: What does the *Maharsha* ask? What are the laws of *taharah* and *tumah* in the Mikdash? What is *Achdus Hashem*, how do you get to pure *bittul* to Hashem and how does Rava say that in *Bava Basra* when in the *sugya* in *Kiddushin* it seems that he holds differently? And this is after these same *avreichim* sat across from me just two years ago and I was trying to explain to them why it’s important to fast one day a year, on Yim Kippur, and why it was worthwhile for them to be strong and not eat *chametz* for seven days of Pesach...”

I spent a long while with Rabbi Weber in the modest office in Dnipropetrovsk, from where the activities are managed, and the stories that flow from his mouth kept me riveted in place. Parenthetically, the office of the *kollel* is in the largest Jewish community center in the world, the Menorah Center located near the Dnieper, established by the rav of the city Harav Shmuel Kaminetzky, *shlita*.

To further drive home his point, Rabbi Weber uses the following example: “Thousands of those *avreichim* came after *Mussaf* on Shavuos to eat the same cheesecake they ate two years ago or five years ago. But in the past, the blintz is what symbolized the holiday, and they agreed to come to shul to hear the *Aseres Hadibros* so they could enjoy the refreshments afterwards. This year, they finished *Mussaf* and came to the *Kiddush* after a full night of learning. Since the first day of *Sefiras HaOmer* they were preparing for the holiday of Mattan Torah. They know what the meaning of ‘*v’etaher v’eskadesh b’kedushah shel ma’alah*’ is, and try to elevate themselves with the 48 traits with which Torah is acquired. Most importantly, they merit to bask in the sweet pleasure of the Torah itself.”

How did it happen? In all honesty, Rabbi Weber struggles to explain the turnabout. “It’s clear that it is not all us. What is happening here is above nature. Sometimes,” he says, “I see it, and I pinch myself in disbelief. After all,

I have no way to explain how this *avreich*, who currently conducts himself like a genuine ben Torah in the full sense of the word, and his home is strictly observant, was not like that at all not so long ago. But I have no questions. *Chazal* say, ‘*Torah mechayah es be’aleha* — Torah revives those who learn it,’ so we do not really need an explanation; we are seeing this so clearly.”

## Don’t Suffice With the Basics

Those *avreichim* can be found today throughout Russia, Belarus and the Ukraine. They are in Muslim Republics controlled by Russia in the past, such as Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, and the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

In addition, there are members of the *kollel* in Germany, which has a large concentration of Russian speaking Jews. Thousands of *avreichim* who attend the *kollel* begin their day with learning, similar to *avreichim* in *kollelim* in Elad and Beit Shemesh. They begin at eight o’clock in the morning, and learn in a *sefer* that lasts two hours, four hours or a whole day. But what characterizes them is that the *sefer* influences their conduct throughout the day, even when each of them goes to do his work among non-Jewish colleagues.

“This *kollel* has generated a real revolution,” Rabbi Weber says. “It has affected not only the lives of the *avreichim*, but also their whole families, the wives, children, parents, friends and the entire community. You speak to

Jews who thought in the past that Judaism is part of an interesting folklore tale, whose practices include singing *Mah Nishtanah* on Pesavh, lighting candles for Chanukah and eating *hamantaschen* on Purim, not to mention singing *Havah Nagilah*, which for many was the ultimate symbol of Judaism. Suddenly you discover that they are busy with the question of where they will get another *lulav* because the one they have is not closed tightly enough, at least not according to all opinions. Suddenly what keeps them busy is how they can refrain from the *issur* of *borer* on Shabbos. And just two years ago, you deliberated whether to invite him to shul on Shabbos, when you knew that he would arrive in a car..."

What is surprising is that he and Rabbi Lipsker feel a deep sense of regret since beginning the *kollel*. Instead of basking in the these unbelievable scenes, they think about all that they missed over the years.

"For thirty five years, we underestimated the intelligence of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora," they said regretfully. "We reached out to them the way you speak to little children. We offered them to come to shul on Shabbos or Yom Kippur, to put on *tefillin*, we told them about the Chanukah and Pesach miracles, and more. We thought that they are so disconnected that they simply could not absorb it all. Yet now, we are addressing requests from the *kollel* in Siberia, which is asking for more *sefarim* of commentaries because they've advanced beyond what we prepared in the learning plan. The questions we get today from *avreichim* are of a totally different nature. They live in a different world."

Indeed, it is only because of the *kollel* that thousands of Chabad *shluchim* all over the world have realized the depths of the words of Chazal "the light within it brings them back to do good." Suddenly they realize that it's one thing to tell a Jew who is far from Torah and *mitzvos* about Hashem, and another thing to simply try and attract him through the *Gemara*. From there, the Jewish *neshamah*, which was present at Har Sinai, will make its way back to the Source, and on the way, that errant Jew will find answers to his questions on his own.

"But we did not innovate this method, we're just trying to bridge some gaps," explains the Chief Rabbi of Russia, Harav Berl Lazar, *shlita*, who oversees the entire program. "One of the biggest problems in the Former Soviet Union is that people who were born under Communism did not have the opportunity to study in *cheder* or a Jewish school. They grew up lacking basic knowledge about Judaism. So it's true that today, there are *baruch Hashem* many frameworks for young people, and this problem no longer exists. But let's not forget that an entire generation of Jews grew up here lacking basic information. Now, because of these *kollels*, they got what they always wanted all the years. Hence, instead of investing in basic concepts, we offered them the chance to dive into the deep, and it just worked."

## Drawn Inside

The idea was conjured by Rabbi Moshe Weber and Rabbi Benzion Lipsker. They say that it came to them suddenly, like a bolt of lightning. "We felt like we were not broadcasting at the same frequency when speaking to people making their way back to Judaism. We tried to explain, but there is a gap. While for us, Torah and *mitzvos* are part of the huge tapestry that envelops each Jew, they did not really understand what we are talking about. They could not pinpoint it, but then they said to us: "Instead of teaching those Jews about basic 'superficial' Jewish information, why don't we just draw them inside?"

They put the idea into action, and opened the first *kollel*. As is the habit of *chassidim* of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the beginning was not a small step, it was a leap. When we ask where the first *kollel* was, Rabbi Weber amends the question: "Not the first *kollel*, the first *kollelim*. We began with twenty-five *kollelim*..."

They emphasize that one of the "ten *mitvzoim*" that the Rebbe announced, and which transformed the lives of millions of Jews cut off from Yiddishkeit, was the "*Mivtza Torah*," the mission to bring the Torah each and every Jew. "Not everyone knows, but you can that *Mivtza Torah* was the most important one that the Rebbe asked to undertake as a project. The interesting thing is that it happened around this time of year, forty years ago. The Rebbe saw that light of Torah is what would bring closer those Jews and demanded that his *chassidim* work on this in a *shturem*, a storm."

At the same time, the beginning was difficult, compared to today, even though they still feel that they have not yet reached their final goal. The beginning was Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan 5775, seven years ago. When asked why they chose a rather plain, not particularly snappy name like Kollel Torah, Rabbi Lipsker explains: "At first we gave it the name Kollel Torah, because that's what we wanted to offer. A real *kollel* network. Not a seminar, not a Torah institution or a school — a *kollel*. And Torah is a word that speaks to the soul of every Jew. We did not want to conceal the message; we wanted to highlight it, to show what we wanted to convey. Indeed, the name caught on. Today there isn't a Jew across Russia or Ukraine who hasn't heard the words 'Kollel Torah' and who doesn't know about it firsthand."

The beginning is a distant memory. Today, the *kollel* network numbers more than 7,500 *avreichim*, who learn in the framework of 250 *kollelim*, comprised of a variety of ages and on different levels. They are scattered throughout 120 cities in 22 countries. There are young, 20-year old men, alongside Jews



A group of Jewish people opening a kollel in Siberia, with young and older people learning together.

who are 70 or 80. There are those who work most of the day and others who are employed as doctors, lawyers, merchants, in high tech or engineering, as well as *avreichim*, who, like in Eretz Yisrael, learn Torah as their full-time occupation. There are those who have been studying on tracks to become ordained for the Rabbinat, alongside those who are still at the very beginning of the way. The common denominator among them is that they introduce themselves proudly as "*avreichim* of Kollel Torah."

Like every other *kollel yungerman*, these *avreichim* are given an allowance of about \$200 a month. In Ukraine, that is considered half of the average wages, so it's a comfortable sum. There are, of course, *roshei kollelim* for each *kollel*, there is careful registration, and there are tests and attendance tracking. The learning program is formulated and guided by a special team in Yerushalayim, headed by two brothers, Rabbi Schneur Ashkenazi and Rabbi Yisrael Ashkenazi (sons of the *mara d'asra* of Kfar Chabad Harav Mordechai Shmuel Ashkenazi, zt"l). Working with them is the content director of the *kollel* curriculum Rabbi Akiva Nimoi. They are the ones who build the program, with the goal of enabling one who learns in the *kollel*, even without any background, to enter the Torah world.

"We built a special unique learning plan," Rabbi Weber explains. "It is made up of a *sugya* in the *Gemara*, presented with the *meforshim*, so that the learner can 'jump into the deep water right away,' alongside *Chumash*, *Nach*, and even *chassidus*. After half a year, the one learning has already acquired knowledge in a number of areas, and he can learn with his own skills. When we see this miracles happening every single day in front of our eyes, we just cannot believe it."

## Up to the Last Minute

When we ask Rabbi Weber what the average age of the *avreich* is, he pauses before answering. "Most of them are young, in their thirties, but we have men of all ages. What I can tell you is that our oldest member who ever learned in *kollel* was a 96-year-old Jew who was very active in the learning. He passed away this past year, during corona, when the *kollel* lost a few dozen members, most of them elderly. But the youngest *talmid* we ever had was a nine year old boy who came to learn with his father and stayed to learn on his own. Today, he is already bar mitzvah and this year, he began to learn in Yeshivas Tomchei Temimim..."

Like in all *kollelim*, there is also a person in charge of attendance. But in contrast to those with this job in Beit Shemesh and Modiin, the one who had the job in the *kollel* in a remote city called Tyumen in the frozen Siberian tundra, was a seventy one year old Jew. As a former army general, he was appointed by the local *shaliach*, Rabbi Yerachmiel Gorelick, to be in charge of recording attendance. Like a real Russian, he did his job assiduously: "He came before everyone and was the last to leave," the *shaliach* related. "I would hear him each morning as he climbed to the second floor where the *kollel* is housed."

But with the beginning of corona, the *kollel* activities stopped. Then the *shaliach* received a phone call from a grandson of this elderly Jew, who, regretfully, is not Jewish. He related that his grandfather passed away the night before in his bed, apparently in his sleep. He sent the *shaliach* a photo of the room where his grandfather lived, with the 'Jewish corner' near his head. Next to the bed was a little table, with his *tallis*, *tefillin*, learning notebook, *sifrei kodesh* and the notebook where he recorded attendance, all in meticulous order. "A Jew who was far from Torah and *mitzvos* his whole life," Rabbi Gorelick says emotionally, "merited at the end of his life to bask in the light of Torah, and that is the picture he took with him to his eternal rest. That is what was near his bed, filling his world."

Rabbi Gorelick relates that he didn't want to endanger the rest of the members of the *kollel*, some of whom were in risk groups. But they did not concede, and came to the *levayah*, keeping all the social distancing rules. The most moving moment was when the body was being buried, when everyone stood and sang together the song that the *niftar* liked: “*Sheyib-aneh Bais Hamikdash.*”

Rabbi Gorelick: “I called this the ‘*Ki Heim Chayeinu*’ story, because the family told me afterwards that they noticed that despite his serious medical issues, he continued living, because he had what to live for. He rose each morning, left the house to go to shul, climbed the stairs, had a job with responsibility, learned with everyone, and then went back down the stairs to go home. Learning gave his life some significance. This story should be a *zechus* for his *neshamah* of Vladimir ben Chaim, *a”h.*”

The influence is felt by all the members of the family. Rabbi Schneur Schneerson, the *shaliach* and rav of Rovna, explains that “in every place, in order to make a change, you need to invest in educating the young generation. Thus, you also influence the parents, as it says ‘*veheishiv lev avos al banim.*’ But here, there’s a very strange situation: children who learned with us and were given a chareidi Jewish education, like Chabad knows how to give, returned home, and nothing they did changed their parents. We just could not ‘catch’ the middle ages — from 30s to 70s — in a superficial way.

“Kollel Torah changed that entirely,” Rabbi Schneerson declares. “People experienced dramatic changes, and I can see it clearly in the eyes of chareidi people who come to visit us. They marvel at the *temimus* of these Yidden who learn in Kollel Torah. You suddenly see a group of several dozen Jews who rediscover their Yiddishkeit, and don’t consider themselves Jewish simply because they sing *Havah Nagilah* or eat *hamantaschan*. You see them explaining to the local media about the holiday in an in depth way, with understanding. I think that’s how you define a revolution.”

Indeed, there was a real revolution here during this past year, the year of corona.

## Expanding Boundaries

Remarkably, while the whole world — including the Jewish world — considers corona a time of paralysis, or a year when we just kept to ourselves, it turns out that a hug revolution took place in Russia and Ukraine, which they credit the virus with. Corona, which led us all to take cover in our homes, was used by Kollel Torah to penetrate those homes. Furthermore, as the virus spread so rapidly, from one nation to another, similarly, hundreds of thousands of more people were infected with the light of Torah, only because of Kollel Torah’s program.

“It was during the first days of the pandemic, after Purim 5780,” Rabbi Weber recalls. “In Russia and Ukraine there were no limitations yet, but as we were connected to people in Israel



and the United States, we realized where things were headed. We began to keep to the guidelines of our own initiative, even though they were not mandatory or official. That’s how we watched with pain as the shuls emptied. The *kollelim*, which just a few days earlier had been thundering with Torah, emptied, as people stayed home.”

The heads of the *kollel* were sure that they were heading for a deep freeze, and that all of the achievements they had attained would disappear. But then the transformation happened. “Because the *shluchim* children all over the world have been learning in virtual settings for years, we were familiar with how it is done. We can say that we were the pioneers in the world of remote studies. We decided to channel those contemporary tools and offer virtual studies. We reached out to the Ohr Avner-Ohr Menachem schools and asked them for basic guidance on how to run such a framework on Zoom. Then we discovered something interesting: the studies in the ‘classroom’ did not stop for a moment. Because people could enter and leave the classroom at any moment, wherever they were in the world, there wasn’t a single moment when the system was inactive. When it was night in America, Jews from Israel were on, and the opposite.”

Thus, the largest *beis medrash* in the world was launched. It was first intended for the *avreichim* of Kollel Torah in Russia and Ukraine. But within a few days, information about it spread, and within a short time, thousands of Russian speaking Jews in locations around the world expressed interest. “We simply could not keep up,” Rabbi Weber relates. “We ran from house to house, plain and simple. We equipped elderly Jews with devices such as cameras, and gave them instructions. We also needed to keep uploading new content. We began with

*shiurim*, and then moved to lectures and activities. We began with *avreichim*, but within a short time, we were inundated with requests from the women, so within a few days we built a varied program for them. We began with a few hours a day, and within a short time, we found ourselves activating a network that provided *shiurim* throughout the day — 24 hours a day six days a week.”

Then they discovered that in the merit of their ability to enter homes, they were also able to reach so many more Jews. “Because people were at home, and studies became virtual, many who did not come to *kollel* in the past joined the studies from home. Thus, from five thousand students we jumped to tens of thousands. In one *shiur*, there were 250,000 people participating simultaneously. It was the largest Jewish lesson in the world ever held on Zoom, and perhaps at all...”

The bottom line is, Rabbi Weber says, the Chabad *shluchim* — who for years had tried to draw Jews in Russia and Ukraine to come to shul — were able to get the Jews once they were out of the shuls...” From the moment corona came, we realized that this was tremendous opportunity to introduce Yiddishkeit into the homes. Usually, Jewish events took place in shul, while the house was less Jewish. But now, the shul came to the house and Jews learned to make a Pesach Seder alone, and Shabbos meals with the family and to put on *tefillin* and daven with everyone. Thus, the homes absorbed more and more Judaism, and many families began to draw closer.”

They enlisted the aid of Reb Yitzchak Mirelshvili, from the Meromim Foundation, who provided the funding, and began. Within a small time, they could see the change clearly. Rabbi Michael Oishi, a Chabad *shaliach* in Kaluga, relates that he liked to listen to the participants conversing casually in the few

moments before the *shiur* began. They spoke amongst themselves about yarmulkes, *mezuzah*, *tallis* and *tefillin*. “For me, this was the highest-quality *devarim beteilim* that I could have imagined,” Rabbi Oishi said.

Rav Lazar notes that even when the shuls emptied, in the merit of this initiative, all the homes became one large shul. “The seven years of Kollel Torah have generated a dramatic change in the lifestyle of thousands of Jews. Before that, there were *shiurim*, courses and seminars, but not shuls. Indeed, most of the *shluchim* were not able to keep their shuls active at all hours of the day. But during corona, Jews who could not leave the house all day, and didn’t go out to work, simply filled their day with *shiurim*, from morning to night. They had a demanding daily schedule that included *shiurim*, activities and tests, and they used each day to advance in huge strides.”

Rabbi Oishi says that in the merit of this initiative, the status of the shul in Russian society has changed. “Because of this program, the Jews realized that the shul not ‘just’ a social club, and not ‘just’ a place for prayer, but also a place to learn. They learned together throughout all hours of the day, and today, now that this period is behind us *baruch Hashem*, many Jews come to the shul simply to learn, in the same way that naturally, Jews in Bnei Brak and Yerushalayim come to shul — to open a *sefer* and learn.”

Rabbi Yerachmiel Gorelick of Tyumen, Russia, thinks that it has helped him learn so much more about the homes. “Suddenly, I saw what was going on in their homes. I could now see how learning affected their home life. In shul I could see them conducting themselves as Jews, but what was going on at home? Now, in this surreal situation, HaKadosh Baruch Hu created for us an opportunity to bring the shul into the home of every Jew. We saw every Jew davening at home, and we saw how the family accepted him and how he was proud to conduct himself as a Jew at home and not only in shul. It was the dramatic change that corona brought into our life of *shlichus.*”

Another advantage of online learning is that it increased the number of participants in the *kollel*. “The studies begin at eight in the morning, and there are many Jews who did not have the opportunity before that to come on time. But the minute the *kollel* became virtual, all those people who could not do it in the past were able to join. So it’s another positive point that this situation brought with it.”

## Reaching Into the Homes

Within a short time, the heads of Kollel Torah realized that this was a wonderful opportunity to reach into the homes. If beforehand, they focused on the *avreich* and their goal was to bring him into the world of Torah, now, they were able to bring their whole families in as well. Thus, they began to flood the system with *shiurim*, lectures and activities, directed as who they called the ‘wives of the *avreichim*,’ the women of the home. And the response was tremendous.



Young people and adults studying with *chavrusos* in the kollel.

That's how the broadcast *shiurim* became a central part of the daily routine of the Jews in Russia and Ukraine. In addition to the *shiurim*, the heads of Kollel Torah gave lectures addressing subjects such as coping with depression, challenges of educating children at home, dealing with anxiety, ways to increase the family income and others. For the Russian Jew, for whom enriching their education and knowledge is a priority, this was the perfect solution. Even Jews who knew nothing about their Judaism, were drawn to these lectures. Rabbi Yehoshua Kaminitzky, the *shaliach* in Belgrade, Serbia, was one of those who immediately honed in on this golden opportunity, and urged the heads of Kollel Torah to grab onto it. Now, in retrospect, he says that he dream of this kind of success.

"The dramatic changes that took place with corona were manifested in the almost complete suspension of tourism, and of course, Israeli tourism, which is very dominant here," he says. "But remarkably enough, instead of experience paralysis, we have seen a huge blossoming. Before Pesach, we presented a model Seder. The entire family sat together, and we conducted the whole Seder with the songs and the *Haggadah*. People told us that they felt like they were at Seder night with us. Of course, we also sent every-one *shemurah matzah* and other provisions.

"Today, everything has gone back to the way it was, except for social distancing. But Kollel Torah has made a huge contribution to the community because it generates a core of ten people who come each morning to the shul to learn, and that's why there's a regular *minyán* that other people can join. That is what creates a community. It also happened with the women, whose influence is stronger on the family and their environment. The group of women who are learning is getting stronger and *baruch Hashem*, it strengthens the foundations of our growing community."

Rabbi Schneerson relates that during corona, the *shlu-*

*chim* analyzed the virus in their labs, and have concluded that "this is the best thing that has happened to us on *shlichus*. We saw the results of sixteen and a half years of *shlichus*. So much potential that was planted over the years was not realized until the virus came. A Jew could perform a *bris milah*, daven each day, put on *tefillin* and learn Torah, but it did not penetrate the home. Corona brought Yiddishkeit into the home. If in the past, a home visit was at most, in the living room, after we took off our shoes at the door, today, Yiddishkeit penetrates every room in the house.

"Women began to bake *challo*s and to make more than they needed so they could separate challah and make a *brachah*, because it is a *segulah*. Men began to daven and put on *tefillin* at home. It's not that the children didn't know that their father put on *tefillin* in shul, but that they only imagined it. They had never seen their father make Kiddush. Maximum, he heard Kiddush and murmured amen in shul. Now he was suddenly making Kiddush at home. Hashem sent us corona so that we should reap its fruits, and that explains the significance of this revolution. Corona is a revolution within a revolution. It brought out the potential of the *kollel* revolution from a latent one to an active one."

## It's Not Just the Learning

Thus, without even realized, Kollel Torah went from a framework that included a few thousand *avreichim*, to a project that draws hundreds of thousands. The number of participants grew at the rate of thousands of Jews per day, from locations all over the world. The head of the *kollel* struggled to keep up with the demand...

"We tried to provide solutions to the demand that just grew bigger, but then it mounted even more," Rabbi Weber related. "Remarkably, we also reached Jews who we could not get to previously, because they lived so far from any Jew-

ish community. People who lived alone in huge cities without a Jewish community in the area were able to hook up to the system and gained access to *shiurim*, and then suddenly became actively involved. They acquired a family that they didn't have before that. They got their Judaism back."

Together with the *shiurim* came the requests. Jews wanted to have a Jewish marriage ceremony, to receive *tefillin*, to learn more about Shabbos, kashrus and *taharah*. "Suddenly we got requests from people who we had not had a way to reach at all, and they now wanted us to conduct a *chuppah* for them, after they had had civil marriages years earlier. They wanted to have a *bris milah*, a bar mitzvah. Jewish life was revived in the hearts of so many Jews. For us, every Jew who returns to his nation, especially in these countries where assimilation is so high, is well worth all the effort."

For example, Rabbi Gorelick shares Oleg's story. Oleg was born in Tyumen, Russia — in the Siberia region. He lived without any religious identity until the age of 69, when he discovered his Judaism as part of a remote lecture from Kollel Torah. Within a short time, Oleg became Avraham, but he passed away half a year after he discovered his Jewish identity, from cardiac arrest that resulted from corona complications. His non-Jewish wife reached out to Rabbi Gorelick and admitted that although she had been sure that her husband would be buried beside her in the Christian cemetery, when she saw how the lectures had made him into a new person — into a believing Jew, she could not allow herself to bury him in a non-Jewish cemetery, as it could harm his soul. She was requesting a kosher, Jewish funeral for him...

In another case, Anna Barizovska, from Norilsk, in the Krasnoyarsk region, deep in Siberia, discovered her Jewish identity through the *shiurim* network. Seventy-two year old Anna was born in Uzbekistan to a Jewish mother and a Christian father. She had never viewed herself as religious, but corona led her to seek out more connection to religion. She had moved with her husband to Norilsk forty years ago for



Rabbi Moshe Weber.

his job in a Siberian gas company. When he passed away a decade later, she stayed. There is no Jewish community in the city, and that's why the church was her first and most natural place of refuge.

Two weeks later, when the secretary of the Jewish community in the capital of Krasnoyarsk called her and offered her to take part of the lectures on Judaism from the local rabbi, she jumped at the chance. Her phone number had been given to the Jewish community in the next city through a Jewish woman who knew her. Since then, Barizovska — who had had nothing to do with the Jewish community — felt like she had become a part of it. Her enthusiasm was contagious and she drew her daughter and three grandchildren — Olga, Oxana and Vladi — in with her, and they also rediscovered their Judaism. Now that studies have returned to their normal format, Anna's three grandchildren are studying in a Jewish institution...

There were also new Jewish homes established as the result of the learning network. "At one of the *shiurim*, which took place in Georgia, two Jewish women got to know one another, and within a short time they introduced their children to each other as a *shidduch*. And thus, a new kosher home was established as the result of one *shiur*."

"For me," Rabbi Weber concludes, "that is exactly the goal. Even when I learn with *avreichim*, I teach them that it is not the learning that is the main point, it is the actions. So while they advance in learning, we expect to see results. Indeed, today we see the seeds that we planted giving fruit."

He says this should not be taken for granted. "Naturally, many years could have passed until we merited to see those seeds sprout. But the Rebbe, zy" a, told us that specifically in this generation, a generation of darkness, we merit to clearly see every spark of light. So when Jews return to their roots, we merit to see at least some of the fruits of our labors, very clearly, with our own eyes." ■