

By Barbara Bensoussan

Photos Naftoli Goldgrab

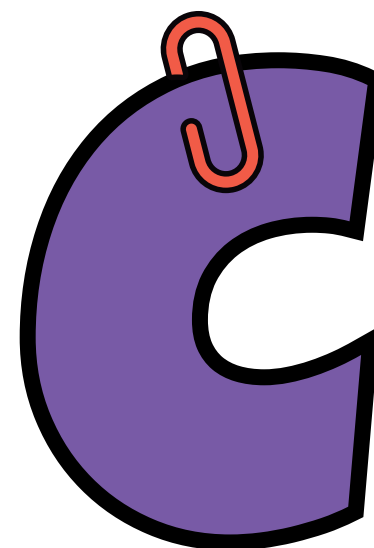
Mishpacha



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He's not a backpacker randomly sauntering into a Torah class in Jerusalem. **THIS FELLOW HAS ALREADY COMMITTED TO A LIFE OF MITZVAH OBSERVANCE,** but he doesn't have the family support, educational background, or cultural frame of reference to become a real part of the new world he's chosen. That's why **RABBI YOSEF SIMON OPENED TORAS DOVID.** Because someone had to step into the breach **TO HELP THOSE WHO'D COMMITTED TO TORAH JUDAISM YET FOUND THEMSELVES ADRIFT**



Classically trained singer and musician Alex Gershoni grew up in Manhattan feeling that some of his extended family members — the ones who were frum — possessed something special that he lacked. And so in his late twenties, he decided on a whim to go to a shul and check out Jewish observance. He was impressed by the people he met and interested in the way they lived their lives, and before long, he became a *shomer Shabbos* Shlomo Aryeh.

Upon his engagement two-and-a-half years ago, Shlomo Aryeh told his then-fiancée that he really wanted to invest in some full-time learning. But he couldn't just enroll in a kollel — he had precious little Hebrew background and no learning skills. He knew about yeshivos for beginners in Eretz Yisrael, but Shlomo Aryeh's future wife wasn't keen on moving so far from her Brooklyn-based family.

Yet Shlomo Aryeh, for his part, realized that “You can only go so far trying to learn Gemara with an English translation.”

What recourse is there for second-stage *baalei teshuvah* like Shlomo Aryeh, people who have become frum and are deeply motivated but don't have the skills to enroll in a mainstream yeshivah?



Rabbi Simon realized someone needed to step into the breach to help those who were already committed to Torah Judaism yet hadn't mastered the skills for a mainstream yeshivah

Rabbi Yosef Simon had the very same question, and in his own experience helping young men going through the teshuvah process, he decided to create an answer. Rabbi Simon is a *talmid* of Ohr Somayach Monsey's Rav Yisroel Simcha Schorr, from whom he received semichah, and when he himself began teaching chassanim, he saw up close the variant struggles of *baalei teshuvah* trying to find their way in a new world without the usual family support, educational background, or cultural frame of reference. Someone, he realized, needed to step into the breach to help those who had committed to Torah Judaism yet found themselves adrift, someone who could encourage their progress and help them navigate milestones like shidduchim, marriage, children, and parnassah.

When Rabbi Simon conceived the idea to open a yeshivah-within-the-yeshivah to service men who were already committed to Torah observance but needed further guidance and development of learning skills, young men who have typically left behind their old friends and family and are in need of a supportive community to encourage their progress and help them navigate milestones like shidduchim, marriage, children, and parnassah, Rav Schorr was all in.

IT TAKES ALL TYPES

Today, the beis medrash of Yeshivas Toras Dovid is packed and buzzing. Housed in a modest former residence on Carlton Road in Monsey, you'd have



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to know it was there to find it, and once there, good luck finding a parking spot in the crowded lot behind.

The *kol Torah* resounds in a plethora of languages and accents, and the men inside encompass all ages and stages, from 18-year-olds to retirees, from white shirts and black pants to polo shirts and even hoodies, jeans and gold necklaces. Chavrusas include teenagers in T-shirts paired with white-shirted *avreichim*, retired yeshivah-educated *balabatim* teaching those with less background, and pensioner *baalei teshuvah* who never had the time to hone their skills and learn in depth.

This is the heart of Yeshiva Toras Dovid's eight levels servicing over 100 *talmidim* daily. Fifteen staff members teach their students topics ranging from basic reading skills to advanced Gemara *shiurim* while simultaneously guiding them in leading the life of a frum Jew today. The yeshivah even has a semichah track for advanced students.

Entering the beis medrash of Toras Dovid, it feels a bit like the U.N. We meet two fellows from France, one from Brazil, a *ger tzedek* from Mexico, and some from less exotic locales like Philadelphia, Baltimore and New Jersey.

"I come from a Russian family in Mill Basin, so I used to be an atheist, very scientifically minded," says a young man named Jonathan Saskin. "But I ran into an old friend who had become frum, and I couldn't believe he'd actually decided to wear a yarmulke and tzitzis. He wanted me to wrap tefillin, and even though I never liked it when guys on the street would accost me to put on tefillin, I agreed just to be able to continue the conversation and stay friends. He invited me to spend a Shabbos, but I didn't feel comfortable at

that point — 24 hours without my phone? No, thanks! But it got me thinking. Jews are the most successful, happy people in the world, yet they’re only 0.2 percent of the population. I knew their wisdom came from the Torah. So I decided I needed to learn more about Torah, even though I was raised as an atheist.

“I’m a stubborn person,” Jonathan continues. “I studied Judaism for a couple of years without believing in Hashem. But the more I read, and the more videos I watched, the more I realized how unlikely it is for the world to have evolved randomly.”

I also speak with Moishe, a Satmar chassid who struggled after losing his mother when he was young. He was shipped overseas where he eventually found his way, and upon his return to the States, he married a girl from New Square and wanted to continue learning — but no kollel was suited for him.

“One Friday night my wife and I were walking home late from a seudah down Route 306, where we met a man from Texas looking for directions,” Moishe relates. “Since the route was a bit complicated, I dropped off my wife and accompanied him to his destination. As we spoke, I told him about my yeshivah struggles, and it turns out he was learning in Toras Dovid. I thought, ‘Nah, that’s not for someone like me,’ but that was two years ago and I’m still there. I found a happy place in Klal Yisrael.”

The yeshivah also welcomes frum-from-birth *talmidim* who never found their path or simply want to work on skills that weren’t developed in their former yeshivos. Yehuda Bronstein spent 11 years at a well-known yeshivah in Boro Park, but when he and his wife moved to Monsey, he complained to his new neighbor Rabbi



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— RABBI YOSEF SIMON

Simon that he had always had a hard time learning *b’iyun* and was hence having trouble in his Monsey kollel.

“Come to us!” Rabbi Simon said, and although Yehuda was first shocked at the suggestion, today he is happily working on his newfound skills as well as helping others who never had the privilege of a yeshivah education.

Tal, a student on the next bench, represents another typical demographic. He grew up in California in a Modern Orthodox, Israeli home and went to Jewish community schools.

“I grew up religious, but I was on autopilot. I never internalized it,” he says. “School was one way, life was another way.”

Tal found himself at Cal State, but at some point, the idea began to percolate that Judaism was something special and not just a collection of restrictions.

“I realized that I didn’t want to lose out on my heritage,” he says. Tal first joined Toras Dovid as a bochur, and today, as a married man, is part of the yeshivah’s kollel.

The student body here is comprised of a wide-ranging group, and in the seven years since Toras Dovid’s founding, Rabbi Simon and his colleagues have developed the wisdom and experience to help nurture their *talmidim* from newbies to well integrated members of the community. Aside from learning skills such as reading Hebrew, davening, and mastering the basics of observance, *talmidim* are guided in how to progress at a sustainable pace and taught that when it comes to spiritual growth, it’s normal to experience discouraging moments. All of this combines to enable *talmidim* in their journey so it remains consistent and ongoing.

FEELING ALIENATED

Rabbi Simon’s own life experience has well equipped him to deal with his diverse student body; as the son of an American father of German descent and a Yemenite Israeli mother, he himself comes from a rather eclectic background.

Yosef Simon grew up bicultural and bicontinental. He was born to a traditionally observant family in New London, Connecticut, where he lived until he was five. Then they moved to Israel and settled in Kiryat Motzkin, near Haifa, close to where his mother’s Yemenite parents lived. They shuttled back and forth, but Yosef and his twin sister spent the majority of their school years — fifth through eleventh grade — in Israel. The Simons returned to the United States after his grandfather passed away.

Once in Ramapo College in Mahwah, New Jersey, Yosef got involved with Jewish causes and served as president of the Hillel. The rabbi there, Rabbi Ely Allen (now at Yeshivas Lev HaTorah in Ramat Beit Shemesh) inspired him greatly, prompting him to enroll in Ohr Somayach-Monsey after graduation. There he found his rebbi for life, Rav Yisroel Simcha Schorr. Highly motivated, Rabbi Simon would eventually earn semichah from Rav Schorr and Rav Shraga Feivel Zimmerman (now in the United Kingdom) and become a chassan teacher. He also paid it forward by becoming involved in *kiruv* and ultimately met his wife Tziporah (née

Winiarz), who was also active in *kiruv* circles.

It was Rav Schorr who drew Rabbi Simon’s attention to the problem of *baalei teshuvah* who couldn’t sustain the new life they’d chosen.

“He told me he was seeing guys become frum, get married, and then drop out,” Rabbi Simon says. “They couldn’t find communities where they felt comfortable. Those who settled ‘in town’ complained that they felt they were just a number.”

Many *baalei teshuvah* live in Monsey, but they tend to be scattered and not living in an organized communal way — and Rabbi Simon witnessed the effects firsthand when he began teaching chassanim and newly religious married men.

“They still had many questions, but often they would hide where they were truly holding in order to ‘pass’ in their new frum circles,” he says. “When they had questions about marriage and intimacy, they felt embarrassed and alienated, like they were the only ones with these questions.”

There were also the men who wanted to keep learning but couldn’t attend a mainstream kollel, and their non-religious families had no concept of supporting a couple in learning.

NOTHING FOR GRANTED

In 2015, as the campus *kiruv* movement began to wane and Ohr Somayach-



Monsey began to downsize, the building started accommodating other yeshivah programs. With Rav Schorr's encouragement to provide a framework of continued learning and guidance for his Ohr Somayach chassanim, Rabbi Simon decided to open a kollel for this demographic.

But how do you go about funding a new kollel for fellows with minimal background? Rabbi Simon approached a number of *baalei tzedakah* for support, but the response was always the same: It's a nice idea, but no, it'll never work. A foray to a *chavrusa's* house on Purim produced a scant \$3,000 — and Rabbi Simon had been cautioned not to open anything until he had at least \$200,000 to \$300,000 put away.

But Rabbi Simon refused to be discouraged. As Elul of 2017 approached, he decided that if it was ever going to happen, he would just have to take the plunge. A group of five of his chassanim became the pioneering members of the new night seder kollel he created on the Ohr Somayach campus. At the end of the first month, someone stepped forward and promised a donation, and Rabbi Simon was able to pay his *yungeleit* \$300 a month per seder. Then another donor heard about it, paid a visit to the kollel, and contributed as well.

Before long, Rabbi Simon's mini-kollel had doubled in number, and he added an afternoon seder. By 2019, he was running a yeshivah as well as a kollel. Most of the men were *baalei teshuvah*, but he also attracted *geirim* and frum-from-birth men who, for various reasons, had not found the right fit in the community.

The choice of name for the new yeshivah, Toras Dovid, honors Rabbi Simon's father-in-law Rabbi Dovid Winiarz *a"h*. Known to many as "The Facebucker Rebbe" who shared inspiring

posts with his 13,000 followers, he was killed in a car accident on his way to an outreach conference when he was only 49. Rabbi Winiarz had his own organization called Survival Through Education, and he would distribute thousands of free seforim and his trademark "Keep Smiling" cards.

"I was actually approached at one point with a significant funding offer from a person who wanted his own family name on the yeshivah," Rabbi Simon says. "But I turned it down. Naming it in honor of my father-in-law was nonnegotiable."

His wife, who taught at Bais Yaakov of Passaic and Cheder Chabad of Monsey, supported his initiative even though it meant tightening their belts as the yeshivah got off the ground.

"We had four kids and were living in a two-bedroom apartment, and we knew it would be a few months before I could get paid anything," he says.

By the following year, Rabbi Simon recruited Rabbi Shimon Rosenblum, who had been the *rosh chabura* at Rabbi Avrohom Schnall's night kollel, where Rabbi Simon had been learning. Rabbi Rosenblum now teaches an advanced shiur at Toras Dovid. Rabbi Simon also persuaded Rabbi Schnall to become the yeshivah's Shabbos rav once a month, giving a *shiur* Friday night, speaking during the kiddush, teaching Mishnah Berurah and Pirkei Avos in the afternoons, and leading zemiros. Rabbi Schnall became so enthusiastic about Toras Dovid that he ended up moving closer to the yeshivah to be able to serve as Shabbos rav every week. He now teaches Hebrew language and grammar to the men during the week.

"What others take for granted, they have to earn," he says. Many of them want to learn to lead the davening and/or lein the parshah, which they do by listening

Young and old, *balabatim* who never had a chance to learn in yeshivah together with young men grateful for the opportunity, all make up the student body of this unusual beis medrash



to tutorial recordings, and Rabbi Schnall tests them when they feel they're ready to try on their own.

Over the years, as Toras Dovid expanded, the yeshivah needed more room and sleeping space. When the former Dahan shul on Carlton Road went up for sale in 2020, a local real estate agent helped Rabbi Simon clinch the deal. The yeshivah moved out of Ohr Somayach to its current location, where today there are 30 men living on-site in the dorm and another 30 housed in nearby basements and apartments. Rabbi Simon just closed on a larger campus on Cooperman Road, a two-structure property that will include a beis medrash, dorm, dining room, and offices. (When we met, he was still short \$350,000 but was cheerfully confident that Hashem would help him raise it, which he did.)

FAMILY MATTERS

Baruch Kramer of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania is the 19-year-old son of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. He grew up thinking he was Jewish — he aspired to become a Reform clergyman — but following a four-month trip to Eretz Yisrael, he decided he wanted to become more religious, only to discover he wasn't even Jewish. Baruch eventually converted with Rabbi Zvi Romm of Yeshiva University, and one of the conditions of his *geirus* was that he had to learn in yeshivah. Rabbi Romm, who happens to be his father's second cousin, recommended Toras Dovid, and in the last six months,

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Baruch has moved up three *shiurim*. The Kramers recently came to spend time with their son, with great trepidation.

"My parents couldn't understand my path, but then they came to visit," says Baruch. "They spent Shabbos with one of the yeshivah's board members and came for a *siyum* I made, which I really pushed myself to finish in time. Their visit changed everything. They loved their Shabbos here and my father, who knows so little, had tears of nachas after dancing in a circle with the other bochurim."

Preserving family relationships is a priority at Toras Dovid, and the rebbeim advise the bochurim on how to deal with their non-frum parents — most notably, not to be heavy-handed about their new religious fervor within their own families.

"I tell the guys, 'You can *mekarev* the entire world, but not your family,'" says the yeshivah's mashgiach Rabbi Zev Wolbe, who encourages them not to alienate their baffled parents with their newfound enthusiasm and to maintain good relationships.

"I'm on the phone speaking to parents

three times a week — they're afraid we're trying to brainwash their children," he says. "I invite them to visit and see for themselves what this is all about."

Some of those visits can be challenging, though.

"We had a couple of parents from the former Soviet Union who came storming in here, taking pictures and yelling at us," relates Belzer chassid and *kiruv* activist Rabbi Yisroel Royde, a beginner's rebbi in the yeshivah and cofounder of the Traveling Chassidim. "They said, 'Our son needs to be a doctor, not learn in yeshivah!' We were never able to connect with them, but we did help the fellow with a shidduch, and he's now married."

It's not simple, when you've finally found your soul's deepest passion, to realize you know less Torah than many four-year-olds; there's so much to catch up on, it's easy to feel discouraged. Top that off with struggling to find the balance between your formerly secular self and your newly religious self. Newcomers often believe that entering this new world requires jettisoning the baggage they arrived with.

Perhaps in a spirit of atonement for a nonkosher past, many hope just to sit and learn all the time, afraid they'll do an *aveirah* if they leave the beis medrash. But too often this leads to a dangerous bottling up of previously normal, natural aspects of their personalities.

"We want them balanced and healthy," Rabbi Simon says. "I play soccer with the guys twice a week. We have one guy who's a personal trainer who often shows up for learning in sweatpants. It's not a *stirah* to be frum and play basketball."

While it's inspiring that the *talmidim* are on fire for Torah, the rebbeim are watchful to make sure they don't burn themselves out.

"We keep the pace of growth steady and slow, because it's also our challenge to keep the fire burning," Rabbi Rosenblum says. The initial phases are like a honeymoon, he explains — until reality sets in. He tells me of a bochur who once complained that he was feeling depressed because his learning wasn't going well.

"I told him, 'Congratulations! Now you're really in, this happens to everybody.'"

The yeshivah sends *talmidim* to local homes for Shabbos, where they can observe the gamut of frum Yidden: people in *klei kodesh*, people who work and learn, professionals, chassidim, litvaks, Sephardim — the real world, not just the cocoon of yeshivah. And since most of the *talmidim* receive no financial support, Rabbi Simon has associated the yeshivah with Fairleigh Dickinson University so his students can take evening courses and receive a degree within two years, with additional options for master's degrees.

As a *talmid's* support system, Toras Dovid assists with more than the standard yeshivah, helping *talmidim* with clothing and tefillin, therapists

when necessary, arranging weddings, and finding jobs, all of which create a framework of success.

"We want to make sure they're running toward Yiddishkeit, not running away from something else," explains Rabbi Wolbe of Toras Dovid's vetting process, which seeks to ensure *talmidim* are coming for the right reasons — because once enrolled, the yeshivah is committed to working on the growth of the whole person.

"We take a guy from the beginning and build him up, and even when he leaves yeshivah, we help him integrate into a community," Rabbi Simon says. "We do all of this so he doesn't fall away."

Take the student who started at Toras Dovid in its second year, shortly after he married and went backpacking around the world. He showed up in a T-shirt and jeans and stayed for the next six years.

"A lot of yeshivos assume you'll just figure things out after you leave," he says, "but when I was ready to move on, Rabbi Simon sat me down and made sure my plans were well thought-out and not an impulsive decision I'd regret."

These days, this former *talmid* lives in Israel and maintains his connection to Toras Dovid with Zoom sessions and visits. He is finishing semichah and writing a sefer, and through it all, consulting with Rabbi Simon. He is also working on opening a yeshivah for Israeli teens who don't fit the standard chareidi mold but still need a place to *shteig* and grow.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Of course it is: a place that encourages growth and support, a place that ensures the flame of Torah burns bright, a place that gives learning a permanent effect. It's a *talmid* doing just as he was taught by his rebbi. ●