

# The Kollel Movement in America

*20th Century Moments that Mattered*

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*Boca Raton Synagogue*

*Sponsored by Debbie and Simcha Firestone*

# Earliest Kollelim?

## *Shem V'ever*

- *Our Rabbis (Gen. Rabbah 63:6) interpreted it [the word וַיִּתְרוּצְצוּ] as an expression of running (רוּצָה). When she passed by the entrances of [the] Torah [academies] of Shem and Eber, Jacob would run and struggle to come out; when she passed the entrance of [a temple of] idolatry,*
- *Thus you learn that after he had received the blessings he concealed himself in Eber's School for fourteen years (**Megillah 17a**). But he received no punishment for them (these fourteen years) on account of the merit of having studied the Torah in Eber's School during that period*

# Earliest Kollelim?

## *Goshen*

וְאֶת־יְהוּדָה שָׁלַח לְפָנָיו אֶל־יֹסֵף לְהוֹרֹת לְפָנָיו גְּשֵׁנָה וַיָּבֵאוּ אֶרְצָהּ גֹּשֶׁן:

*Rashi* - לפניו BEFORE HIM — means before he should arrive there. A Midrashic comment is: להורת לפניו (in the sense of, “that there might be teaching before him”) — to establish for him a House of Study from which Teaching (תורה or הוראה) might go forth

# What was the purpose of a Kollel?

- ✦ *To incentivize gifted individuals to continue studying Torah*
- ✦ *Create a breeding ground for Rabbinic leaders*



# Early Kollelim - 1879

## *Difference between a **Kollel** and a **Yeshiva***

- ***Yeshiva** - studied the theoretical aspects of the Talmud*
- ***Kollel** - studied practical, code law (more of a professional training program), rabbinic apprenticeships, 3 year limit*

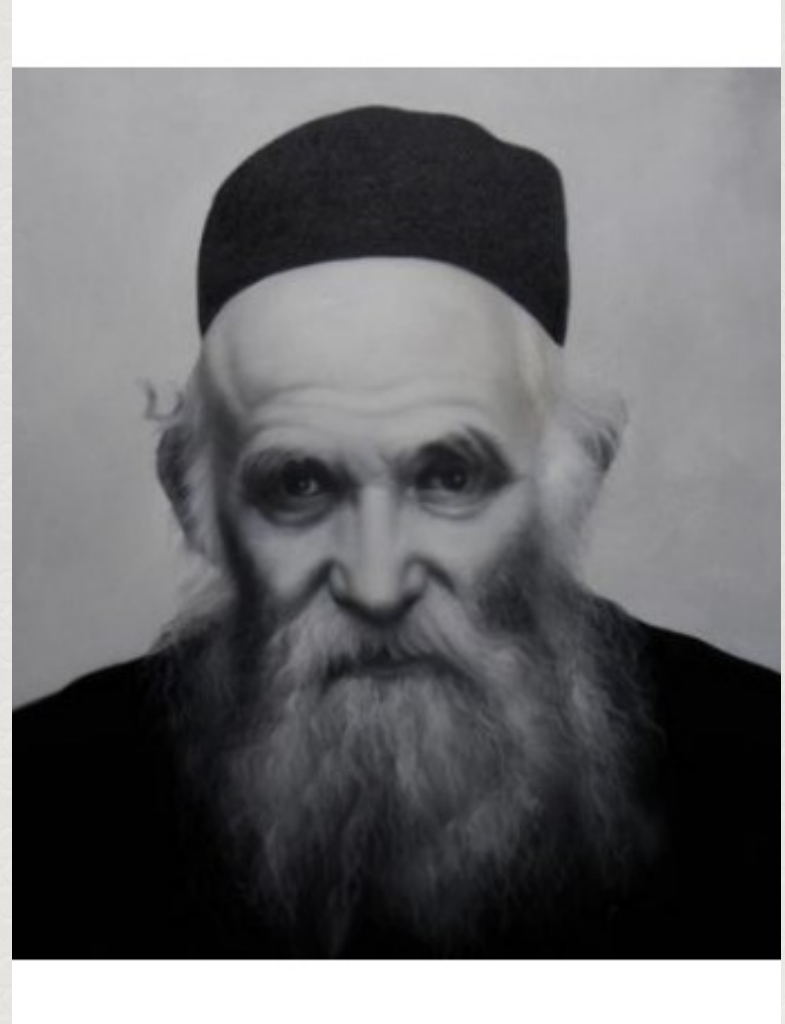
# Why focus on practical study?

- *To combat the demands from Russian authorities that Rabbis receive professional training only in the official government-sponsored rabbinical seminaries.*
- *Fundraising considerations*



Rav Aharon  
Kotler

*1891 - 1962*



# Biography of R. Kotler

- *Born in 1891*
- *At age 14, he starts learning in the famous Slabodka yeshiva*
- *In 1914, he marries the daughter of R. Isser Zalman Meltzer (1870-1953)*



# R. Isser Zalman Meltzer

- ✦ *Studied in Volozhin*
- ✦ *In Volozhin, he was part of the zionist group called Nes Tsiona.*
- ✦ *Introduced secular studies into the Yeshiva*
- ✦ *Was chosen by the Alter of Slabodka to give a shire in Slabodka*
- ✦ *In 1897, he is chosen to lead a yeshiva in Slutsk*



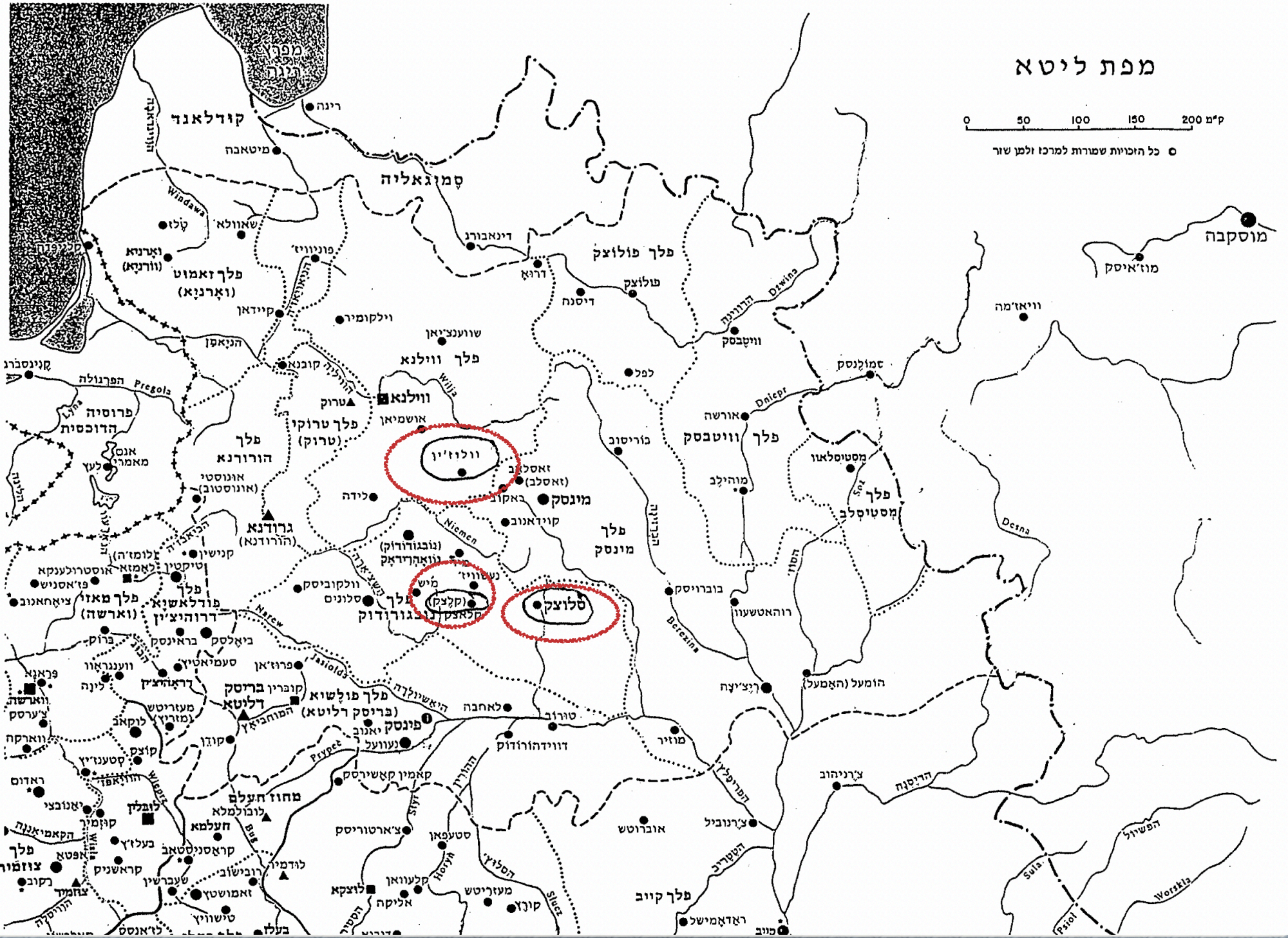
# Slotsk and Kletsk

- ✿ *R. Kotler moves to Slotsk with his father in law*
- ✿ *R. Meltzer is failed and R. Kotler takes over the Yeshiva*
- ✿ *In 1921, the persecution from the Russians was so severe that the Yeshiva split into 2.*
- ✿ *1/2 stay in Slotsk and 1/2 go to Kletsk (one in Russia, the other in Poland)*

# מפת ליטא

0 50 100 150 200 ק"מ

כל הוסיפות שמורות למרכז ולמנ שור



# R. Kotler

- ✿ *R. Meltzer sends R. Kotler to Kletsk to become the Rosh Yeshiva*
- ✿ *In the 1920's/30's, his reputation in Lithuania continues to grow.*
- ✿ *He's the leader of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah*
- ✿ *By 1929, they outgrow the Beis Medrash and need a new building.*
- ✿ *By the end of 1939, the Yeshiva is forced to close.*

# Coming to America

*Irving Bunim &  
the war relief effort*



# Raising the \$\$\$

IB: During the war he [Rabbi Kotler] was stuck in Russia. I knew about him so I helped get him out. One *Shabbos* noon I was sitting and having lunch when Rabbi Boruch Kaplan [a founder of the Orthodox Beth Jacob schools] and Rabbi Sender Linchner [a son-in-law of Rabbi Mendlowitz] came over in a cab. Rabbi Feinstein, Rabbi Heiman, and Rabbi Mendlowitz sent them to me in a cab on *Shabbos* to go and raise money for that purpose. I think it was 1940. So we went to Flatbush in a cab. They wanted to lynch me there in Flatbush [for violating the Sabbath by traveling in an automobile], but with the rabbis there we convinced them. This is how we raised the money. Then we took it to the Joint Distribution Committee and they made the arrangements.

WH: Why did you feel it was necessary to go on the Sabbath?

IB: For two reasons. First, we needed the money immediately and second, the idea was to create a commotion . . . so they shouldn't sleep on it.<sup>49</sup>

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NY

# TWO GOALS

- ✦ *Save European Jewry  
(Vaad Hatzala)*
- ✦ *Re-Establish Torah in  
America*



# Vaad Hatzala

## *Interview with Amos Bunim*

*Can you give us an example of a hatzolah incident involving your father and Rav Aharon?*

**AB:** Yes. Towards the end of the war, they received a cable from the hatzolah heroes, Reb Yitzchok and Mrs. Recha Sternbuch, from Switzerland. A ransom deal had been negotiated with Himmler, the head of the SS, whereby it would be possible to ransom Jews. The deal was that every month, for twenty months, they would pay \$250,000 and the Nazis would release 15,000 Jews. It came roughly to \$17 a person. They immediately needed a down payment of \$1,200,000. The Vaad Hatzolah raised \$230,000, but they were still short \$970,000. Rav Aharon decided to seek assistance from the Joint Distribution Committee and approached Mr. Moe

Leavitt, the head of the Joint, to ask for a loan. Leavitt absolutely refused to transfer funds to the enemy and pay ransom. He said, "You came to the wrong person. We are against bribes." My father became furious and told Leavitt, "If you don't lend us the money that will save Jews from death, I will send a letter to every single member of the Joint telling them exactly what you have done!"

Leavitt got scared and, reluctantly, agreed to the loan. The sole condition was that the United States government grant the Vaad Hatzolah a license to transfer the funds overseas to Switzerland and then, through their agents, to Himmler. It was a condition which Leavitt felt the Vaad could never meet.

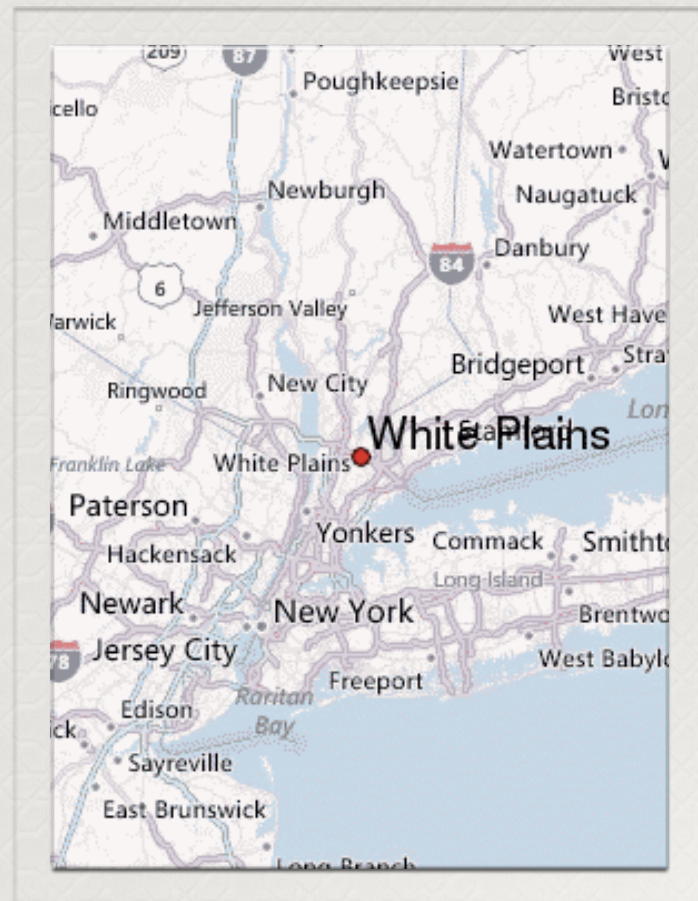
Rav Aharon and my father went to Washington to petition President Roosevelt, who directed them to the only Jew in his Cabinet, Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau. When the proposal was first made, Morgenthau balked, saying that the United States could not authorize the transfer of funds to the enemy. Upon hearing Morgenthau's answer, Rav Aharon began to shake and, with his eyes flashing, he told my father who served as translator, "Tell him that if he cannot help to rescue his fellow Jews at this time, then he is worth nothing, and his position is worth nothing, because one Jewish life is worth more than all the positions in Washington!"

My father understood that diplomacy dictated that he could not repeat verbatim what Rav Aharon had said, and he took the edge off of Rav Aharon's words, saying, "There comes a time in history when you have to help your brothers." Rav Aharon immediately understood that my father had not properly conveyed what he had said, and he turned to my father and commanded him to tell Morgenthau exactly what he had said. Fearing the worst, my father conveyed Rav Aharon's exact words, but instead of becoming angry, Morgenthau put his head down on his desk for a few minutes. Finally, he picked up his head and, with great emotion, authorized the transfer.



# The First Yeshiva

- ✿ *In 1942, a yeshiva opened in White Plains*
- ✿ *Upon becoming Rosh Yeshiva, R. Kotler immediately wanted to moved it.*



# Lakewood!



from New York

to Lakewood Township, New Jersey 08701

**1 h 31 min** (69.1 miles)



via Garden State Pkwy

Best route

**⚠ This route has tolls.**



# Beis Medrash Gavoha

- ✿ *Opens in 1943 with 14 students*
- ✿ *Goes from 14-40 students in the first few years*
- ✿ *By the time R. Kotler dies in December, 1962, it has 220 students*
- ✿ *Currently, it has over 6,500 married and undergraduate students.*

# Lakewood's Goal?

“There was a major difference between the situation in Europe and the situation the Rosh Yeshiva found in America. In Europe the groundwork for Harbotzas Torah (Torah dissemination) was there. The concept and ideal of studying Torah "Lishmoh" - Torah Hashem for its own sake - because of its inherent value as the word of Hashem - was ingrained in European Bnei Yeshiva from the time of Reb Chaim Volozhin, the Vilna Gaon and before... Not so in America, however.. The concept and, all the more so, the practical possibility of devoting many years in Yeshiva and in Kollel to total absorption in Torah lishmoh... just didn't exist. If one did study longer than the norm in Yeshivos it was in preparation for a career in Rabbonus or Chinuch... What [Rav Aharon] brought about was a spiritual revolution both in the American yeshiva world itself, as well as in the minds of American philanthropists, to whom the entire idea of authentic yeshivos on American soil, particularly the novel idea of studying Torah lishmoh after marriage, was outlandish.” (*The Legacy of Maharon Rav Aharon Kotler,* pp. 12-13, 40)

# “Authentic” Judaism

*Adam Ferziger, The Emergence of the Community Kollel*

atmosphere among mid-twentieth century American Jewry. In Rabbi Aharon Kotler’s estimation, what was needed most in post-World War II Jewish America was a group of Jews that repudiated the idealized vision of integration of Judaism and American culture. “Authentic” Judaism could develop in America only if a core population isolated itself physically and concentrated exclusively on enriching its own Jewish knowledge and commitment. The key to achieving this goal, in his opinion, was to establish a structure on American soil that would enable young men to dedicate themselves to their Torah studies for a considerable number of years after they had married and begun a family.<sup>45</sup> Measured in

# The Uniqueness of Lakewood

- ✿ *No time limit placed upon studying there*
- ✿ *The students were specifically not to involve themselves with the local community*
- ✿ *This was not a preparation for the a role in the rabbinate or the wider community*

# Obstacles to its success?

RK: Getting back to your question, so this was one obstacle. Just the problem of setting up a Yeshiva. My father had to recruit rebbaim from Europe who were qualified. He came here in 1943 again to set up the Yeshiva. For the most part he was involved in Hatzoloh. The whole week he worked on Hatzoloh. He gave shiurim in New York but only over the weekend. He was extremely busy with Hatzoloh. But the main difficulty was that the level of learning here wasn't that high and our desire was to develop a generation of gedolei Torah who were American trained products and we have done that. There are gedolim today who are Americans, not European.

The second obstacle was that my father felt that there should be Torah Lishmo and that all practical benefits would come from it anyway. He felt that Torah Lishmo raises tremendously the general level of the Jewish community. The problem was that this was against the spirit in the country. The people asked: 'What's the Tachlis of studying Torah. What can be gained from it?' This was the attitude. It was hard to explain that sometimes the most lasting things seem to come out from things which seem to have no purpose. *(Interview conducted by Professor William Helmreich with Rav Schneur Kotler)*

# Mrs. Sarah Kotler-Schwartzman

Father often used to challenge *baalei batim*. On one such occasion at an emergency fund-raising meeting, he put it in approximately these words: “I don’t want you to misunderstand me; I don’t want to mislead you. There is a need for *rosh yeshivas* in this country and elsewhere and Lakewood will produce them. There is a need for effective teachers and for the right kind of rabbis and Lakewood will produce these too. There is a need for *baalei-batim-talmidei chachomim* (laymen-scholars) and Lakewood will send them forth. However, the *raison d’être* of Lakewood is ‘*limud haTorah lishmo*’—to learn Torah for its own value. It is with this understanding, and for this purpose, that I am asking for your support.’<sup>57</sup>



# Reasons for Lakewood's Success?

“The “modern” rabbis in the Orthodox community, they “fit right in”. They spoke English, dressed in the right clothes. So where did it get them? Many of the congregants left the religion. There is no solution in compromise. If you want to succeed you can't compromise, or give in. You have to be strong.” *(Interview conducted by Professor William Helmreich with Rav Schneur Kotler)*

# Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary

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## KOLLELIM



Kollel programs serve scholars of exceptional promise who wish to devote all their academic energies to areas of Talmud and Halacha. Each program is designed for students with distinct career goals, whether in Jewish education, the rabbinate, Jewish scholarship or other pursuits both in and out of Avodat HaKodesh.

Kollel fellows may be eligible to receive fellowships and residence hall scholarships.

To learn more about our kollel programs, please use the side navigation.

# YU Commentator

Of course, every moment spent learning Torah is to be valued and has spiritual significance. But in a program whose students devote as many as five hours to Torah study, it is imperative that they maximize their time. It is quite difficult to do that when they don't understand why they are learning Sanhedrin, even if they don't bother to ask.

The problem is that no one seems to have a good answer to that question. Ask any MYP student and you might hear something like this: the yeshiva adheres to the time-honored tradition of learning so-called “yeshivish” masekhtot (tractates) of Talmud such as Sanhedrin because of their supposed complexity and intellectual sophistication over halakhically practical tractates such as Berakhot. On the surface, this is merely an homage to the Eastern European yeshiva system and an unconscious choice for a respected yeshiva that has to keep up its reputation as an elite Talmudic academy. Yet a simple assessment of this seemingly inconsequential decision reveals how remarkably inefficient it is. Consider the following: The importance of mastering halakha when one has time to do so is undeniable. Yet the majority of students in MYP do not have time to learn halakha regularly, and even if they do, do not have the time or resources to learn it in depth. Why not learn halakhically practical masekhtot so Rebbeim can teach both theoretical Talmudic principles (sometimes called lomdus) and how those principles become normative halakha? Not only would it provide an opportunity and much-needed time window for students to learn halakha, but it would also teach them about the halakhic process, something that few outside the rabbinate actually understand.

*(Why The Mazer Yeshiva Program Can't Afford to Be Lakewood By: Netanel Paley)*

# From Survival to Expansion

“The Kollel is viewed as a resettlement program of a slice of the yeshiva, of the yeshiva ideals and mentality in another community.” *(Rabbi Yaakov Shulman, Director of the Lakewood community Kollel program)*

# A Community Kollel

...in most [community] Kollelim, the members of the Kollel actively participate in the educational needs of the community. This is done in off-hours, by donating time for classes for adult education. The effect this has on the community is immeasurable.

However, more effective is the indirect ripple effect which the Kollelim have had on the community. The young men who study in the kollelim become models for the rest of the community for what Torah culture is all about. The presence of the idealism of a group of young men who give up money and prestige for the pursuit of Jewish knowledge is the most powerful statement of what Jewish values are. In the face of such models, people are forced to reexamine their own scale of values in a Jewish light. At the least, they are compelled to find some time during the day when they can devote themselves to Torah wisdom. And once these people begin studying Torah, they themselves become more and more committed to Jewish practices. (R. Moshe Shternbuch)

# Outreach and Zionist Kollels

- ✿ *1987 - Atlanta Scholars Kollel* (“Whether you’re Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, unaffiliated or somewhere in between, the Atlanta Scholars Kollel (ASK) is your most vibrant source for Jewish learning in Atlanta...”)
- ✿ *1993 - Cleveland Torat Zion Kollel* (“the focus of the kollel’s work lies more in the “Zionist” area than in the “Religious” one. The outreach in which the Kollel engages is mostly towards Torat Eretz Yisrael – teaching about the uniqueness of the land and the special mitzvah (commandment) of living in it.”)
- ✿ *1996 - Boca Raton Synagogue Kollel*



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