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REVIVING YIDDISHKEIT IN KOVNO

A CONVERSATION WITH
RABBI MOSHE SHEINFELD

“ While there's a sense of sadness and hesitation about going to a place where there was so much destruction, it's also joyful to be in a place of rebirth and revitalization. ”

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REVIVING YIDDISHKAIT

INKOVNO

BY RABBI YITZCHOK FRANKFURTER

Kovno Memorial for the Jewish victims murdered during WWII at the Ninth Fort.

A CONVERSATION WITH
**RABBI
MOSHE
SHEINFELD**

Rabbi Moshe Sheinfeld at Ami's offices.



Rabbi Sheinfeld with Rav Moshe Shapiro (right)



he was cold and that she should go back home to get his coat. By the time she returned with the coat he was gone. That's how Rav Elchonon saved my sister's life."

What was particularly tragic about the martyrdom of Rav Elchonon was the fact that he could have escaped, but decided not to abandon his *talmidim*. In the spring of 1939, five months before World War II broke out, Rav Elchonon was on a fund-raising trip to America. The administration of Yeshivas Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn urged him to stay in the United States. Rav Shlomo Heiman, the *rosh yeshivah* of Torah Vodaath, had agreed to step aside for him, and Rav Gedaliah Schorr was busy procuring American visas for Rav Wasserman's *talmidim*. But Rav Elchonon insisted on going back to Europe, saying, "Would you have me abandon my family and my other 400 children [students]?" During a stopover in London, Rav Elchonon again rejected pleas from local supporters not to return: "A captain doesn't abandon his ship in a storm. My place is at the *yeshivah*!" (Excerpted from *Rabbi Elchonon: The Life and Ideals of Rabbi Elchonon Bunim Wasserman of Baranovich* by Aharon Suraski; 1982.) On 12 Tamuz 5701 (1941), Rav Elchonon was murdered in Kovno along with many of his *talmidim*.

I wonder how Rebbetzin Kotler would react to the fact that Jewish life is returning to that forsaken city.

Between 1920 and 1939, Kovno, modern-day Kaunas, located in central Lithuania, was the largest city in the country as well as its capital. It had a Jewish population of 35,000-40,000, about one-fourth of the total population. The *yeshivah* in Slobodka, an impoverished district of the city, was one of Europe's most prestigious institutions of higher Jewish learning. Kovno had almost 100 Jewish organizations, 40 synagogues, numerous Yiddish schools, four Hebrew high schools, a Jewish hospital and scores of Jewish-owned businesses.

When Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940, there were mass arrests of Jews and confiscation of their

property, and Jewish communal organizations disappeared almost overnight. Following Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union

on June 22, 1941, the Soviet forces fled Kovno. The Germans occupied the city two days later, and in early July, German *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing units) and their Lithuanian auxiliaries began the systematic massacre of Jews in several of the forts around Kovno.

These forts had been constructed by the Russian czars in the 19th century for the defense of the city. The Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators shot thousands of Jewish men, women and children, primarily in the Ninth Fort, but also in the Fourth and Seventh. There is uncertainty as to which fort Rav Elchonon was martyred in.

Within six months of the German occupation, half of all the Jews of Kovno were murdered. Only a few hundred survived the war.

RENEWAL

Today, however, that picture is changing. Despite the fact

One of the first thoughts I have upon meeting Rabbi Moshe Sheinfeld is that I wish I could have introduced him to Rebbetzin Rishel Kotler, *z"l*. A few years ago I had the privilege of speaking to the esteemed *rebbetzin* in her home in Lakewood, New Jersey, and she shared with me in vivid detail the story of how Rav Elchonon Wasserman, *Hy"d*, the renowned *rosh yeshivah* of Baranovich, was taken by the Germans in 1941 from her parents' apartment in Slobodka to a Kovno bunker, where he was shot to death.

"I am originally from Memel, Lithuania" the *rebbetzin* told me, "and when the Germans arrived in 1939, we fled to Slobodka, which is a few hours away. Slobodka was then under Russian occupation. We lived in Slobodka for two years, in an apartment right above Rav Avraham Grodzinski, the *mashgiach* of the Slobodka Yeshiva, which was right across the street.

"Rav Elchonon would frequently stay with us in Memel. In our *vegen shtiebel* [garage] we had a *shtender* and a bed set aside for him. Rav Elchonon would go to Kelm for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and would then stay with us over Sukkos. He was very close to my father, who collected money for his *yeshivah*. Rav Elchonon also stayed with us in Slobodka. It was from my parents' apartment that the Nazis took him away to be killed."

When I asked her if she was there when it happened, she explained that she was no longer living in Slobodka at the time, but that her two sisters had witnessed the whole thing.

"The Germans came in June of 1941; I'd already left that March. But my sisters were still in Slobodka: Rochel Sarna, the *rebbetzin* of Rav Chaim Sarna, *z"l*, and Shulamis Volpe, the wife of Reb Yaakov Yehoshua Volpe of Bnei Brak. They were the last two people left in the apartment and the only ones who saw Rav Elchonon being taken away.

"Rochel, who was a year younger than me, was around 16 at the time and used to assist Rav Elchonon whenever he stayed with us. She ran after him and started pleading with the Nazis to let him go. She had some command of the German language, and spoke to the Nazis in German. Out of concern for her safety, Rav Elchonon told her that

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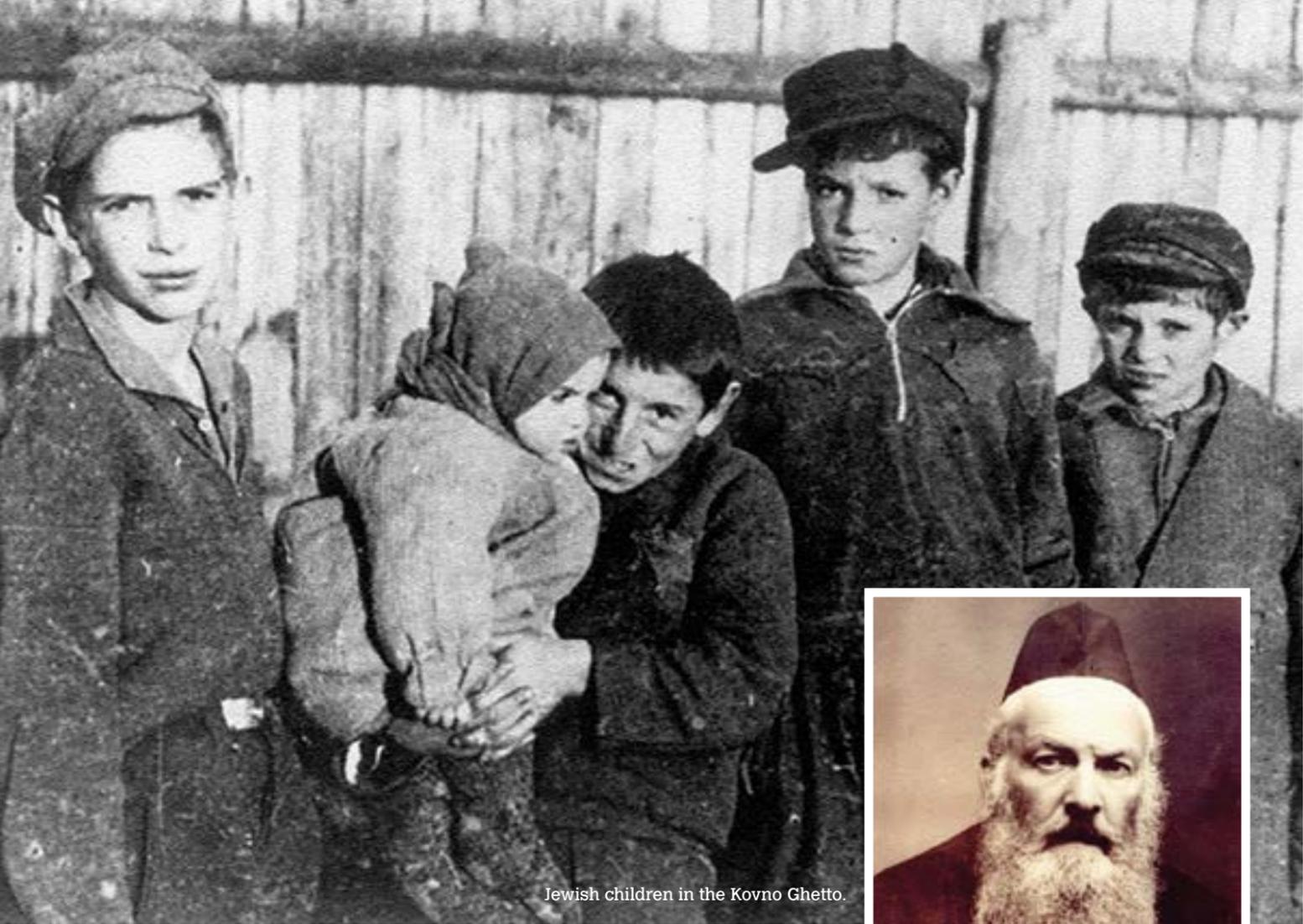
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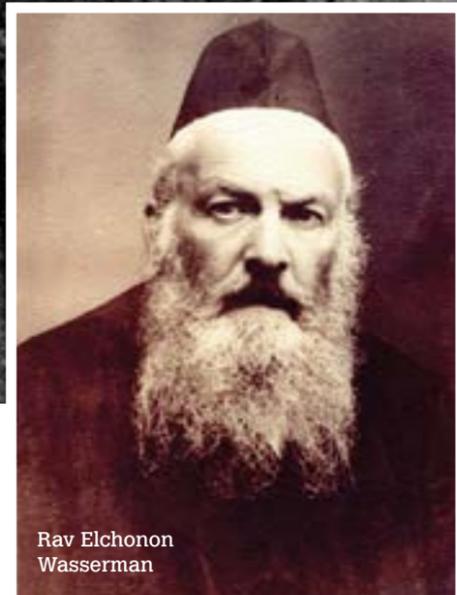
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Jewish children in the Kovno Ghetto.



Rav Elchonon Wasserman

years ago. Our *kehillah* is made up mostly of Israeli medical students at the Kaunas University of Medicine. Our center is the only Jewish institution in the city. We're also in the middle of building a *mikvah*, because the closest one is almost two hours away. There's an old, pre-war synagogue that has continued to function over the years, but that depends on your definition of 'function.' It's more like a museum, but it does have *davening* occasionally on Shabbos and Yom Tov. The original congregation was progressive but not exactly Reform. The only reason the Nazis didn't destroy it was that they used it as a huge warehouse for shoes, so it remained intact. There are also a couple of older buildings that used to be *shuls*. One of them was turned into an auto repair shop. Another one is now an office building."

"Can you still hear the sounds of the *mussar* of Slobodka?"

"I think that someone who wants to hear it can hear it."

"It's part of our collective memory," I say. "Kovno was where countless Jewish people were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, including Rav Elchonon Wasserman. So much blood was spilled there. I would imagine that you can hear how 'the blood of your brother is crying from the ground' wherever you go."

"All of Europe is like that," he tells me. "The Holocaust wiped out everything. Very few families came back afterwards, and most of their children intermarried over the years. As far as Jewish continuity is concerned, the situation is disastrous. It *mamash* brings you to tears. But while there's certainly a sense of sadness and hesitation about going to a place where there was so much destruction, it's also joyful to be in a place of rebirth and revitalization. The idea now is to move forward and do whatever we can to bring *Yiddishkeit* back."

"Is it safe to walk down the street in visibly Jewish clothing?"

"In general, yes. But I still try to be very careful not to go to places with large crowds and I use side streets whenever possible. People have shouted 'Jude' at me a few times over the past four years, but I could probably count them on the fingers of one hand. The police there are very vigilant too."

A FAMILY AFFAIR

"Is this a family undertaking? Is your wife as involved in the center's activities as you are?"

"Of course. She has a hand in everything. She also gives *shiurim*. She's like a mother to all the young female students. She supports me wholeheartedly. The moment she's unhappy, I won't be there anymore!"

"Do you have any children?"

"My wife and I were married in 2006 and we have three boys. There's a very special family in Kovno that started a *cheder* in their home for my two older boys. The husband is the *melamed* for *limudei kodesh* and the wife teaches the secular subjects. My oldest son is nine, the middle one is six, and the little one is only a year and half."

"How do they like living in Kovno?"

"They'd rather be back in Israel. Kovno is *galus*. We try to explain to them that it's important for us to be there right now, and that without our Jewish center there wouldn't be any *Yiddishkeit* for the students, and it would be so easy for them to forget that they're Jewish. Most of them stay in the country for six years, and because they are secular they don't understand how terrible it is to marry a non-Jew. I see how many of them intermarry."

"Do your kids have other children their age to play with?"

"This year was difficult, but we found another family with kids that we're hoping is going to move there. That would definitely make things easier. This past year was definitely very challenging for my children."

"Will you be going back to Israel for the summer?"

"Yes. We need to reconnect with our friends and family and recharge our batteries. We also stay on top of things as far as our children's *chinuch* is concerned. Whenever we go back, the kids go to *cheder*—two weeks in the winter and a few weeks in the summer. *Baruch Hashem*, not only are they on par with other kids their age, but their *rebbe*s tell me they're ahead of the rest of the class."

"When you originally went to Kovno, did you plan on being there for so long?"

"Not at all. We originally went for ten months. I never imagined I'd still be there."



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that very few Jews descended from Kovno's original inhabitants remain, the city has become a magnet for Israeli medical students. To meet their needs, an Israeli organization called Nefesh Yehudi has sent a young and energetic rabbi named Moshe Sheinfeld to Kovno.

Today, he has come to see me in *Ami's* offices in Boro Park, accompanied by his father, who has been chaperoning his son around New York and serving as his translator. Rabbi Sheinfeld and I converse in Hebrew, although he is far more fluent in the language than I will ever be.

"How long have you been in Kovno?" I inquire.

"I started working there just over four



Kovno Memorial for the Jewish victims murdered at the Seventh Fort.



Site of the future mikvah (inset top);
Kovno kehillah sukkah (inset middle);
Dining room at the Jewish center of
Kovno (inset bottom)



Back then I was working for an organization run by the Wolfson Foundation called Nefesh Yehudi, which is dedicated to strengthening Jewish identity among university students through all kinds of enrichment activities and classes, mainly in Israel. Almost every university in Israel has a branch. So many students have been encouraged to become *baalei teshuvah*. The branch in Kovno is the largest one in *chutz laaretz*. Before Kovno I was in Migdal Haemek for four years, working to establish a branch in Jezreel Valley College in Afula. It's a very big school."

"Your learning background is *yeshivish*. Does that help you in your work?"

"Of course, but I also had lots of *siyata dishmaya*. I spent seven years in Haifa at Nachalat Haleviim, the *yeshiva* founded by Rav Yisroel Meir Weiss, the son-in-law of Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz. After I established the program in Afula I began giving *shiurim* at other universities in the North."

CHALLENGES

"What are some of the students' greatest challenges?"

"The biggest challenge is that classes are held on Shabbos and Yom Tov. They make no accommodations for the Jewish students. I have to vouch for every student who attends our programs on Shabbos and Yom Tov, because they don't always have permission to miss classes, even for religious reasons. If they had to make up all those classes, they'd have to be in school for an extra year."

"Last year was the first time I managed to get the university to make an exception for Yom Kippur. I sent a request to the dean, and it was the first time such a request was granted. A notice was issued that Jewish students would be exempt from classes on the condition that they spent the day in synagogue. He even said that he was going to send an inspector to make sure that all the students who weren't in class were actually in *shul*! Dozens of students came

to *daven* and most of them fasted. It was amazing, really a very respectable turnout. What I'd like to do now is try to get this kind of exemption for all the *Yomim Tovim*, and eventually for Shabbos too."

"I met with Julius Pranevičius, the Lithuanian consul general in New York, for an article we did in *Ami*," I tell him, "and I found him to be a very kind and approachable person. If you need anything, I believe he would be of assistance."

"If you can introduce me to him that would be a big mitzvah."

"I'll do what I can. Tell me about your relationship with the local authorities."

"We have a good relationship with them. Not me personally, but representatives of the Wolfson Foundation. We are in contact with the municipality and the government, but we don't really request anything specific from them."

"Have you learned much Lithuanian?"

"Since most of my time is spent with Israelis, I speak Hebrew the majority of the time, but I have a basic understanding of the language. My children probably understand more than I do."

"So most of the people you work with are pretty young."

"Yes, but some stay on in Kovno after they graduate to do their internships and find a job, so they're beginning to form a *kehillah*. I can already see that our presence here is making a difference. Since the center opened there have been quite a few *shidduchim* among the students. I'm going to be the *mesader kiddushin* at two weddings this summer. Some of these students have even decided to become *shomer Shabbos* while

they're in school, and that's extremely difficult and a very big *nisayon*."

"How can they keep Shabbos and keep up with their studies? What do you advise them to do?"

"Each student has different issues. Sometimes they have questions I can't answer, so I ask my *rav* in Israel. For example, one student started keeping Shabbos and did so for several weeks. Then she saw that a big exam was scheduled for Shabbos a few weeks later. While she could have taken it on an alternate date later in the month, the problem was that she had another exam around the same time, and she couldn't possibly study for both of them. She told me that if she continued keeping Shabbos and failed one of the tests, she was going to have to stop keeping Shabbos altogether. These are very difficult dilemmas. I obviously can't just say, 'Okay, you can write on Shabbos,' because it's *asur*. I have to be very careful how I answer their questions."

"How many *shomer Shabbos* families are there in Kovno?"

"About a dozen, all of whom came from Israel and became *baalei teshuvah* through our programs. They all keep kosher and are slowly taking on more and more *mitzvos*."

PURITY

"What about a *mikvah*?" I ask.

"That's the biggest hurdle. There's a Chabad *mikvah* in Vilna, which is about an hour and a half away by car. Sometimes we have to go to a different town that's a two-hour drive. In the wintertime the roads can be blocked with snow, making it very hard to get there. It isn't easy to convince someone



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Old synagogue in Kovno



who's just starting to become *frum* to do this. It's a very big *nisayon*. That's why completing the *mikvah* in Kovno is so important. It's actually my main project right now. *Baruch Hashem*, we've already purchased a building.

"Interestingly, right after we bought it we learned that it used to belong to a Jew. We could even see where the *mezuzah* used to be on the front door. Now we're up to remodeling the inside. By law the outside has to be preserved, which contributes a lot to the total cost. I've already spoken to some people there who have expressed a willingness to help, so G-d willing we'll be able to complete this project when I get back to Kovno. It's a major undertaking, but with Hashem's help we will succeed.

"I have a letter here from Rav Moshe Shapiro," he says, showing me a handwritten document, "in which he encourages me to complete the *mikvah*. These are some pictures of what it's going to look like after it's finished. I also have a picture of Chiune Sugihara's son, who came to visit us. Sugihara, of course, was the Japanese diplomat in Kovno who saved the lives of thousands of Jews, including many *rabbanim* and *talmidim* of the Mir Yeshiva, by issuing visas for them."

"Chabad hasn't come to Kovno yet?"

"No, only to Vilna. There's another *kehillah* there, mostly older people."

"Are there Jews in other parts of Lithuania?"

"The biggest community is in Vilna, probably a few hundred. In Kovno there are a few dozen Jews aside from the university students. Then there are handfuls in Ponovezh, Kėdainiai, Klaipėda, Šiauliai and elsewhere, but no active community services."

WHY KOVNO?

"With so many universities in Israel, why do Israelis come to a place like Kovno?"

"It's very hard to get into an Israeli medical school. You need to get a very high score on the entrance exams. So they go to Europe, not only Lithuania. There are probably 5,000 Israelis in European medical schools. The entrance exams are much easier, and they go back to work in Israel afterwards."

"Does Israel accept the medical degrees they receive in Lithuania?"

"Israel only requires that they take an exam before they are able to practice medicine there."

"How long do they stay in Europe?"

"The medical degree is a six-year pro-

gram, followed by an internship. Some people specialize in fields like orthopedics or pediatrics, which take a few more years."

"Are there other foreign students at the university?"

"Of course. They come from all over the world, but the Israelis make up about 20-25% of the foreign students. They attend separate classes that are taught in English."

"How long is the flight from Israel to Lithuania? Do the students fly back and forth a lot?"

"A direct flight is only about four hours, and there are several direct flights a week, but they don't go home all that often. They're too busy with their studies. There are so many other Israelis here that they acclimate very quickly. They get two vacations a year, one in the winter and one in the summer."

"What kind of kosher food can you get in Kovno?"

"We're the only place that serves meals. We make lunch every day for about 50 students, which is served from noon until 4 p.m. But they don't just come for the food, they come to socialize and relax. They can also study if they want. We have classrooms, a coffee corner and a *shul*."

"What about *shiurim*?"

"Absolutely. Every day we cover a different topic: the weekly *parshah*, whichever Yom Tov is coming up, the fundamentals of *emunah* and *hashkafah*, everything. There are a total of around 150 students, and almost all of them come for at least one Shabbos meal as well as *shiurim*. We usually have 80 people at the table on Shabbos. The center is really their second home. I want them to feel that way."

"Where is all that food prepared?"

"We have a big kitchen and a cooking staff that makes everything on site. The funding comes mainly from Mr. Willy Stern from London and the Wolfson Foundation, whose support is very substantial. Their partnership is essentially what keeps the center in operation."

"Where do you get kosher meat and other products?"

"Our meat and poultry come from Manchester, England. It arrives in refrigerated trucks. The canned and packaged goods come from a big supplier in Hungary who imports the products from Israel, including long-life milk with a *Badatz hechsher*, and distributes them all over Europe. We also get a shipment of dairy products from England once a month. If we forget to order something, we just have to manage until the following month. Lithuania is not like America, where every major supermarket has a kosher section or at least all kinds of products with rabbinical supervision on the regular shelves."

"Do you consider what you're doing *mesiras nefesh*, especially since you grew up in Jerusalem surrounded by kosher food stores, pizza shops and falafel stands?"

"I wouldn't go that far. People can learn to live without a lot of conveniences. *Baruch Hashem*, my wife and I don't even miss them anymore."

"Are the meals you provide only for students? Are they free of charge?"

"We charge a small fee, and anyone who comes to Kovno is welcome to eat there, not only students. Almost every week we have Jewish tourists at our Shabbos table. And we have guests from outside Kovno all the time—rabbis and other visitors."

"Do any local Lithuanian Jews come to the center?"

"Sure. Some people knew that their families were Jewish and kept the sparks

of *Yiddishkeit* burning. Some of the locals come from religious families and are attracted to the *davening*. Shabbos and Yom Tov are important to them, and attendance at our activities is slowly increasing."

"What about the cemetery that used to be there? Are the *matzeivos* still standing?"

"The big cemetery is still there, but a lot of it has been destroyed. There's another cemetery where Rav Yitzchak Elchonon Spektor and the Devar Avraham are buried that's in better condition."

"What do you do in your free time?"

"I've written two *sefarim* on *parshas hashavua*. I'd like to give you copies of them. They're actually the result of a collaborative effort with my wife, who typed up the notes from my *shiurim*. Many of the ideas come from other books. *Nefesh Yehudi* helped me get them published. I'm hoping to write something on a more *lomdishe* level after we start a *kollel*."

"Perhaps you could do that in conjunction with Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood. They recently opened a *kollel* in Moscow."

"That would be great. There are all kinds of learning programs being started all over the world. If we had a *kollel* in Kovno it would really be like *techiyas hameisim*. Maybe we could invite some *bachurim* from Lakewood and New York. We would also have to find out who is funding the *kollel* in Moscow and see if he's interested in starting one in Kovno, too. It would probably be more difficult, though, because there are more Jews in Moscow. Still, that *kehillah* also started out small, and look at it today. I would appreciate if you could give me their contact information."

While I wish I could put him in touch with Rebbetzin Rishel Kotler, I resolve to connect him with her son, Rabbi Aaron Kotler, who is behind the *kollel* in Moscow.

Before we part, I ask him what message he would like to send to *klal Yisrael*.

"My message is that every Jew, no matter how far he seems from *Yiddishkeit*, has a spark inside his *neshamah* that yearns to hear *dvar Hashem*. I see what I'm doing in Kovno as a big *shlichus* and a tremendous *zechus*. Once we find a way to that spark, its light begins to shine brighter and ignite the sparks in others, and more and more Jews find their way back to a life of Torah and *mitzvos*." □

TORAH CHANGED THE STORY OF MY LIFE #547

Mr. Goldberg from Kiryas Yoel called in to Kollel Chatzos, asking to be signed up for a partnership. The request: "Daven that I merit healthy children." Unusual for someone who has five children under the age of nine. Expected, if you knew that each one of the five Goldberg children suffered from serious health problems. The past few years had been difficult for the Goldbergs. The constant demands of caring for their children... The

financial strain of covering medical expenses... The worry that they may never be zoche to a healthy child... What does an erliche yid do when facing difficulty? He davens to the only one who can help. And daven he did, tearfully beseeching Hashem that he be zoche to a healthy child.

“And then it occurred to him: Kollel Chatzos. ‘If Hashem has planted this idea in my mind after such a fervent Tefillah.’”

And then it occurred to him: Kollel Chatzos. 'If Hashem has planted this idea in my mind after such a fervent Tefillah,' he thought, 'then it's surely His will that I partner with Kollel Chatzos as a *sehulah* for salvation. Fast-forward to Teves 5776. The news spread like wildfire. Mrs. Goldberg had a given birth to a baby boy. And, no worries, the baby is perfectly healthy.

***** This wondrous story was related by Mr. Goldberg when he called in before Lag Beomer to request that the Talmidei Chachamim daven for him at the Kever of R' Shimon.

"I've experienced it firsthand" he said. "Their tefilos help."

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