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JEWISH NEWS

of Greater Phoenix



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Oasis in the desert

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Twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides compared words of Torah to water. If this is so, the Valley's Jewish community is currently in no danger of drought. Earlier this year, two kollelim (centers for Jewish learning) were established in Phoenix.

By teaching classes and one-on-one sessions, studying Torah several hours each week, and providing role models for traditional Judaism, the seven families of the kollelim share the same goal - to bring Torah to the Valley's Jewish community.

Rabbi David Rebibo, spiritual leader at Beth Joseph Congregation, an Orthodox synagogue in Phoenix, began the effort three years ago to establish the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel.

To emphasize that it would be a "community" kollel, Rebibo extended an open invitation to the Valley's diverse Jewish institutions to attend town hall meetings to discuss his plans. He also looked to kollelim in other American cities to find what he felt would work best for Phoenix.

He chose to work with the Torah Mitzion program, based in Israel, because of its "strong Israeli flavor," he says.

Rebibo says the added ingredient of Israel gives the kollel an "ability to bring Israel to Phoenix and to play a role in improving and promoting the relations between Israel and Phoenix."

The three couples in the Torah Mitzion program, including the women, have served in the Israeli army and have studied in Israel. After a two-year period, they and their families will return to Israel, and a new group will take their place.

Just blocks away in central Phoenix, The Phoenix Community Kollel was founded largely



Rabbis David Goldman, Yakov Bronsteyn, Zvi Holland and Raphi Landesman of the Phoenix Community Kollel study and teach over 40 hours each week.

Photos by Leisah Namm

camp
TORAH STUDY
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through the effort of Rabbi Chaim Silver, spiritual leader of Young Israel of Phoenix, also an Orthodox synagogue. The kollel is comprised of four couples who moved to the Valley from Israel.

Rabbi Zvi Holland says the goal of The Phoenix Community Kollel, affiliated with The National Society for Hebrew Day Schools, is "to turn the community into a place of Torah."

By offering a wide array of learning opportunities, the kollel aspires to give Phoenix's Jews what they would get if they were living in the large Jewish communities of New York, Los Angeles or Jerusalem, Holland says.

"In a nutshell, this has always been the secret of Jewish survival," he says. "To have the Torah means a tremendous wellspring, a vastly challenging, intellectually stimulating and useful body of knowledge. Even knowing that it exists is what has kept us going.

"Without any real Jewish identity, there won't be Jews anymore," he adds.

During the Holocaust, the established Torah educational structure that existed in Europe was decimated. In America, starting in the 1920s, the yeshiva infrastructure of scholarly devotion to Talmudic law slowly grew, Holland says.

"As the communities developed in the United States, (leaders) saw they needed certain things to function as Jewish communities," such as bolstering education resources by having a group of people studying Torah together, he says.

The concept of a community kollel is that if a Jewish community lacked the resources for a center of learning, its leaders would import people to start an institute, Holland says.

"Los Angeles, 40 years ago, was no different from Phoenix. In 1960, the first real strong rabbinical presence came to Los Angeles, and Los Angeles has grown ever since then," he says.

Today's Los Angeles Jewish community boasts boys' and girls' yeshivas, kollelim, Jewish day schools and many kosher restaurants.

"Without Torah education, there's no such thing as a vital Jewish community. And that's what we're here for," Holland says. "It's not like we're the only ... Jewish educational resource in town, but there is definitely a great need."

"It's very important for the Jewish community to understand what makes us Jewish and what keeps us Jewish is the commitment that we have to our Torah," says Silver.

Rabbi Gedalia Peterseil says the purpose of the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel is to "really instill that love of Israel" and "provide some sort of bridge over the gap between the different sects of Judaism."

To do that, members of the kollel "become as involved with the community as we can," Peterseil says. "Definitely our goal is to spread the Torah, (which is) what really combines all four sects of Judaism. ... We all have the same heritage, the same legacy - we all have the same book that is the binding book for all of us."

The literal translation of "kollel" is "inclusive." According to the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel's mission statement, it is a "home away from home for every Jew."

Classes are taught by the men and women of both kollelim at various locations, including Beth Joseph, Young Israel, Phoenix Hebrew Academy and in private homes.

The Greater Phoenix Community Kollel offers "Behind the Scenes of Mitzvot," "The

Book of Yehoshua," "Women in the Bible," "Conversational Hebrew" and parsha (Torah portion) discussions.

At the Phoenix Community Kollel, students can study "Basic Judaism," "In Footsteps of Prophets," "Practical Judaism," "Halacha," Hebrew and parsha.

The rabbis at The Phoenix Community Kollel hold major study sessions weekdays from 8:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. at Young Israel and 1:15 -4 p.m. at Phoenix Hebrew Academy and the community is invited to attend at any time.

Members of the kollelim also teach at Hebrew High classes held at Temple Chai, a Reform synagogue in Phoenix, and through the Bureau of Jewish Education and the Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix. (See the community calendar of Jewish News of Greater Phoenix for class times and days.)

Both kollelim also offer private sessions.

"Aside from the classes, you must do one-on-one (learning)," says Holland. "There's really no other way to reach people."

Peterseil says of his kollel, "We put a large emphasis on making people feel welcome to come learn as individuals."

David Friedman, 32, of Phoenix, studies with Rabbi Dovid Goldman at The Phoenix Community Kollel.

"The opportunity to study one-on-one with a learned rabbi who takes the time to make sure I understand it personally is of tremendous value to me," Friedman says. "I'm somewhat intimidated to speak up in certain classes, so (studying) one-on-one has really helped me get the courage to really learn things that I want to learn."

Friedman has also taken classes at BJE and through the federation's Young Leadership Division.

"The distinction for the kollel is I would say it's very traditional, and it's a little more academic; it's more closely tied to the actual text of things," he says.

Elizabeth Rothstein, a deputy county attorney and member of Young Israel, says she has gained spiritual fulfillment out of taking the classes.

"Being a newly religious woman, recently married, it's helped me to connect more with being observant when I get to meet more religious people and live by their example," she says.

Friedman says that it's been "tremendously valuable" to him to have the opportunity to witness "four families of very traditional Orthodox upbringing and lifestyle and just to see the way they conduct themselves and to see a real example of a true Orthodox lifestyle."

Janice Gotfried, also a kollel student, agrees.

"It helps show us on a day-to-day basis the importance of Torah learning and Torah study because these men study all day long and we see it going on. So it's good to see as a role model ... to see how people do devote (their time) to studying all day long."

Another advantage of having the kollelim in town is "availability," says Gotfried, a member of Young Israel.

"If I have a halachic (Jewish law) question, or if I just have a question in general, they're always available. ... I can learn at my own level and interest. ... (The teachers) are eager to

share their wealth of knowledge with us."

David Steinway, a physician who has lived in the Valley for 16 years, says the kollelim "have added a whole new dimension (to Phoenix) and may be very beneficial for the future."

"I think many times a single rabbi running a large, or even a small, congregation has a difficult time in keeping everybody happy all of the time," he says. "We now have more rabbis ... in Arizona than I can ever remember and I think it offers a good opportunity for anyone who's wanting to learn."

Having two kollelim in Phoenix poses no problem, Rebibo says.

[Meet the Kollel families](#)

"Both serve a very important purpose," Rebibo says. "I call upon the community to recognize the need for both kollelim. We need both. There is no doubt they are both working in the same direction, (toward) the same objective," he says.

Both kollelim are funded by private donors in the community. In addition, the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel received a grant of \$25,000 from the Jewish Community Foundation and The Phoenix Community Kollel received a grant from its parent organization.

Plans are underway for the creation of a board for the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel whose members will represent the diverse segments of the community, Rebibo says.

"I think if they are successful in what their goals are, both community kollelim could be supported, Gotfried says. "If they ... have touched the lives in their outreach ... that will not be a problem because people will appreciate and celebrate what they've brought to our community," she adds.

Contact the Greater Phoenix Community Kollel/Torah Mitzion at 602-277-8858 and The Phoenix Community Kollel at 602-433-0300.

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