

# Providing for the Kollel Yungeleit of Eretz Yisroel for Over a Decade

The Story of



**Adopt-a-Kollel**  
AN INTERNATIONAL RELIEF RESPONSE

The current funding crisis for yeshivos and kollelim in Eretz Yisroel brings to mind a similar time over a decade ago when the government also drastically cut funding. That crisis led to the formation of Adopt-a-Kollel, the innovative organization that created a new way for Yidden across the world to help kollelim in Artzeinu Hakadosh while reaping benefits themselves from deep connections forged with “their” Kollel *yungeleit*. Since then, Adopt-a-Kollel has remained at the forefront as a main conduit to support the kollelim.

As the first shuls in the program begin their 12<sup>th</sup> year of partnership with their adopted kollelim, The Shopper sat down with Adopt-a-Kollel’s Director Rabbi Yaakov Bernfeld and Lakewood Coordinator Rabbi Shmuel Weiss to discuss the past, present, and future of this incredible endeavor.

## How It All Began

In September of 2013, the government in Eretz Yisroel cut the budget for kollel stipends in an unprecedented manner. With kollelim across the country unable to meet their budgets, word began reaching America of families unable to put bread on the table. Men happily toiled in Torah all day, but were not being paid

and could not provide for their families, even according to the minimal lifestyle they were used to. The Torah scholars of Eretz Yisroel had always been more than willing to lead lives of austerity and simplicity. The new financial crisis, however, plunged many into abject destitution and literal hunger.

The response from America and beyond was Adopt-a-Kollel, an innovative program that allows shuls and *batei medrash* in *chutz la’aretz* to create a partnership with a kollel in Eretz Yisroel.

In this way, even those who are not wealthy and cannot send large donations can become part of the power of the *rabbim*. With small amounts from each individual, each shul could commit to cover a percentage of the budget as a group, thus enabling the *yungeleit* to receive their stipends and make it through the month.

This would not be a “*keren*.” Rather, it would be a two-way street, with both sides benefiting in a very meaningful way.

And so, a movement was born.

## Unprecedented Acceptance & Growth

The very first shul to volunteer to partner with a kollel in Eretz





Yisroel is right here in Lakewood. While Adopt-a-Kollel did not officially launch until Sukkos, Rav Michel Handelsman *shlita*, *rav* of Khal Shaarei Torah, delivered a speech in his shul on Rosh Hashanah, in which he spoke about the importance of this idea and urged his congregation to take on a partnership. Interestingly, soon after they committed to a partnership, the shul was able to relocate from their basement location to a building of their own.

In short order, the name Adopt-a-Kollel became very familiar in frum circles. The program was warmly endorsed by the leading *gedolim* of America and Eretz Yisroel, who gave their *brachos* to all those who participate. Rav Dan Segal *shlita*, for example, was extremely enthusiastic with the idea of giving the general public in America the opportunity to have the incredible *zechus* of *barbatzas haTorah*.

One unique aspect of Adopt-A-Kollel is that every penny collected is sent directly to the recipient. The shul sends the funds straight to their partner kollel, without it even making a stop in any office. This means that 100 percent of the money goes directly to the cause, with not a cent spent on any type of overhead.

The connection between the partners, however, goes much beyond simply sending money. The Rov of the shul often travels to Eretz Yisroel, where he is accorded great esteem by “his” kollel and frequently honored by being asked to address the *avreichim*. When members of the shul visit Israel, they also take the opportunity to pay a visit to their partners and are greeted with much love and warmth, often spending part of their stay learning in the kollel with the young men they have created a bond with. So too, the *roshei kollelim* from Eretz Yisroel frequently travel overseas to visit their partner shul, where they address the *mispaelim* and provide *chizuk* and words of Torah.

The *roshei kollelim* are greeted with respect and admiration. Being treated with reverence and asked to speak rather than coming to the shul as a fundraiser is a source of great *chizuk* for the *roshei kollelim*. They can sense how much their shul is behind them, and they truly appreciate it.

The kollelim accept the shul members as their family, and when they make a *simcha* – such as a *siyum* or the publication of a *sefer* – they include their partner shul in the celebration.

Every shul is able to choose the kollel of their preference. Sometimes, a shul asks to be matched with a kollel that has some form of connection and common ground, such as a chassidishe shul being paired with a similar style kollel, and a Litvishe shul with a kollel of the same bent. However, there are exceptions to this rule, with some chasidishe shuls being paired with Sfardi kollelim, etc. If a shul doesn't have a particular kollel in mind or needs help finding the right one, Adopt-a-Kollel's Israeli office is happy to lend a hand. They thoroughly check out each kollel, including making unannounced visits, so they can brief the shul members on their exact options, thus helping them make an informed decision.

### Other Options for Partnerships

While the Adopt-a-Kollel shul partnerships remain the most common type of partnership, they also offer a number of other options.

Adopt-a-Kollel's corporate branch connects businesses with kollelim, thus allowing offices to become partners in Torah learning on the highest level and to elevate their workplace.

The corporate model was initiated by business owners themselves. They approached the Adopt-a-Kollel leadership saying they had seen how successful the program was for shuls and wanted to adapt it for their businesses as well. The shul formula showed that for a relatively small sum each month from every individual, a real difference can be made and families can literally be saved from hunger. This idea is very attractive to businesses

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CEOs also appreciated that Adopt-a-Kollel was a way to unify the employees in a higher pursuit. They saw that Torah study could be a powerful tool to bring the staff members together under a lofty banner and to elevate the office and transform it into a *makom Torah*.

Dozens of workplaces have benefited from this arrangement, and have been inspired by visits from their *roshei kollel* and by employees visiting their kollel in Eretz Yisroel.

Another option is the “Menuchas Hanefesh” program that matches individual donors with individual, exceptional *yungeleit*

Upon recommendation from a *rosh kollel*, along with additional research and inquiries, Adopt-a-Kollel meets personally with the *avreich* to review his personal situation, including living expenses and income. Based on this, they develop an accurate monthly amount that will allow him to learn with *menuchas hanefesh*. When donors approach Adopt-a-Kollel asking for such a partnership, they are paired with one of the vetted *yungeleit* and their donated funds are sent directly to the recipient each month.

Over 120 such partnerships have already been made.

There are also groups of single girls who have reached out asking for the *zechus* of supporting a kollel. About ten such groups have been formed and matched with kollelim that they send funds to on a monthly basis. In appreciation of their commitment, Adopt-a-Kollel arranged periodical inspirational speeches from renowned speakers for all of the girls’ groups. More recently, families have banded together, often as a *zechus* or *l’iluy nishmas* a loved one, to adopt a kollel.







## The Current Situation

The Adopt-a-Kollel network currently has over 1,400 gabbaim and several hundred rabbanim all around the world, all of whom are dedicated to the singular mission of helping *yungeleit* in Eretz Yisroel in a systematic way, with a steady and healthy flow of funds. The idea has become firmly rooted in Klal Yisroel; it has become almost standard for shuls to ask for a partner kollel. Staggering amounts have been sent over the past 11 years – with the total number at well over \$200 million!

The shuls are extremely proud of “their” *yungeleit* in Eretz Yisroel and give as much as they can to help. No pressure is placed on anyone to donate, and there is no minimum or maximum amount required from any individual member. While the directors meet with the gabbaim to draw up a goal and a plan, there is no *bischayvus* or hard commitment. Everyone gives what they can, and it adds up to a solid amount of assistance. And after seeing how much their help is appreciated, people often push themselves to give even more.

The partnership is signed for one year. At the end of that time, the year of Torah accomplishment is joyously celebrated, and the shul almost inevitably signs up for another year.

Lakewood, the place where it all began, continues to play a major role in the Adopt-a-Kollel movement, with the largest number of shuls of any community being located right here.

While many fundraising endeavors have a “shelf life,” Adopt-a-Kollel has only increased in its appeal over the years. The enthusiasm has only gone up, with the numbers continuing to rise.

Adopt-a-Kollel has created a tremendous *ruach* of *haramas keren haTorah*, and the ideal of learning all day has become more and more admired by people around the world. It is now an accepted priority, and Adopt-a-Kollel is largely to credit for engendering that perception amongst the general public.

The current funding cuts in Eretz Yisroel have created a new deficit for the kollelim, and shuls are stepping forward with a very warm response to do all they can to help cover this deficit.

As Rabbi Weiss says, “We see *siyata d’Shmaya* every day in ways that are *shelo k’derech hateva*. I could relate many incredible stories, but the most important thing is how much this has affected the lives of so many *talmidei chachamim*. You can go into hundreds of kollelim and see how knowing that the *bnei chutz la’aretz* are standing behind them has really given a *cheshek* to the *yungeleit* of Eretz Yisroel. The raising of the *keren haTorah* has been remarkable!

“*Habet m’shamayim u’rei!* Look at how so many people are giving for Torah! It is all *l’shmah*. The donors don’t personally benefit from how much they give. In fact, the *roshei kollel* have no idea how much each individual gives. They get one check from the shul without knowing who gave more and who gave less. But people still exert themselves to give a little more and a little more... It’s incredible to see!

“My *hergesh* is that it’s *pashut* that the Ribono Shel Olam orchestrated all of this. The entire thing – the fact that Adopt-a-Kollel keeps growing and that so many want to join is a *davar pelah*. It is clear that Hashem orchestrated it because this is what Klal Yisroel needs, and it is my privilege to be part of it.”