

'I Feel Like Rav Weissmandl — I See a Holocaust Threatening, I Cry Out and My Voice Echoes in the Silence'

BY YISRAEL HERSHKOWITZ

It's the beginning of Elul *zman*, just like in yeshivos around the world, only this time Rav David Keleti is no longer serving as *R"m* in Yeshivas Me'oros HaTorah of Telz-stone, but rather in his native Hungary.

The old synagogue slowly begins to fill up. Youths arrive, put on *kippas* and assemble for *Minchah*. The *gabbai*, an attorney and member of the student committee at the local university, speaks briefly, followed by a lecture on the meaning of Elul and the approaching Yamim Nora'im. There are also refreshments and a challenging riddle that gets everyone involved.

Central to the event is the *shiur* of Rav Keleti, which begins from the *Gemara*, goes on to *Rishonim* and *Poskim*, and concludes with the Maharal and *Chovos Halevavos*. He makes sure to cite a well-known philosopher, and adds comments from the field of psychology. A famous clinical psychologist sits in the front row, his enthusiastic nod noticed by the others.

As the event comes to a close, I realize that what they call a "lecture," Rav Keleti calls the opening of the Elul *zman*.

But in Hungary, this is the way — as proven by the dozens of *talmidim* that learn in the yeshiva Rav Keleti established after first founding a *kollel* in Budapest.

Four years ago, Rav Keleti, a *talmid muvhak* of Harav Nachum Partzovitz, *zt"l*, of Yeshivas Mir, resolved that he could no longer put off this mission.

"My parents, *a"h*, were true '*Ungarische Yidden*,'" he says. "They did not live in Budapest, where most Jews belonged to the Neologue [Reform] community that for decades had been lost to *Yiddishkeit*. We lived in the country, in the area of Debresin, and the tens of thousands of Jews that lived there were fully observant. This was where I grew up. Only after the Communists began tightening their control did we come to Eretz Yisrael."

So why did he return?

"The fact that there are tens of thousands of Jews here without any connection to Torah gave me no rest," he says.

Perhaps Rav Keleti's first turning point came as a boy, when he was sent to Haifa to study piano. "It was before Pesach," Rav Keleti recalls, "and my teacher, a Jew who had come from Hungary the year before us, asked me what exactly Pesach was. I was stunned by his ignorance. I had heard that there were Jews who had turned their backs on *Yiddishkeit*, but seeing such ignorance up close shook me to the core."

It was then that Rav Keleti resolved that when the time came, he would do whatever he could to restore these Jews to their once glorious past.

A Small Light Vanquishes Much Darkness

So there he was, in Budapest, trying to create *yesh me'ayin*.

"I ran into a lot of indifference,

but my decision was unchanged," he says.

"The truth is, many times I thought about giving up. I thought to myself, 'Look, I tried,' but then I would recall what the *Gedolei Hador* had said, how they encouraged me."

The Belzer Rebbe, *shlita*, gave Rav Keleti counsel, encouragement and even an initial donation. Harav Aharon Leib Steinman, *shlita*, also encouraged Rav Keleti, advising him to first found a *kollel* where *avreichim* from Eretz Yisrael would learn.

Rav Keleti asked if he should select *avreichim* who work in *kiruv*, and Rav Steinman replied that there was no need for this: "They'll sit and learn and *shteig*, and the locals will be warmed by the fire of Torah. There is no need for *kiruv*; the Torah on its own will illuminate *neshamos*."

At its peak, the *kollel* had six *avreichim*, who finished many *masechtos* besides learning with

local Jews. With this success, Rav Keleti found himself a *Rosh Kollel* in every sense of the word. Most of his time was now going to raising money for the *kollel* and the ongoing activities of the budding community.

"By the time I could spend a month straight here in Budapest and see progress, I had to wrench myself away to go out and raise money," says Rav Keleti.

He does not mention that at the same time, he served as secretary, coordinator, school teacher, event organizer, and basically everything else.

After several years, the *avreichim*'s children grew older and the families had to move back to Eretz Yisrael for their children's *chinuch*, which was not available in Hungary. The *kollel* was reduced to Rav Keleti and Rav Yehoshua Domen, a Hungarian-born-and-raised *avreich*, who spent many fruitful years in Yeshivas Givat Shaul of Harav

Shlomo Wolbe.

The two share the good and hard times as one. When they can, they learn *b'chavrusa*, but they must often stop to teach community members coming to learn, or see to the many other needs of this fledgling *kehillah*.

You Revealed the Secret

"Even in the times of the Chasam Sofer, Budapest was considered a *Haskalah* stronghold. At its peak, the Neologue community numbered hundreds of thousands. Before the Holocaust, there were dozens of synagogues in the city, only a few of them Orthodox," says Gabor (Gavriel), one of Rav Keleti's *talmidim*.

"Add to this the Communist regime after World War II, when Torah activity was banned outright, and the results are that in Budapest alone live almost 100,000 Jews who lack even the slightest notion of what Judaism is all about. Many do not even

know that they are Jews."

For Jews of this sort, explains Gabor, familiar outreach strategies don't work. A call for returning to one's roots only gets a negative reaction. Who needs more Jewishness? After all, there's a Jewish soccer team, Jewish 'culture,' there's the so-called 'Jewish kitchen' with *kneidlach* in *treife* soup and blintzes that contain meat and milk (*R"l*). There are the Jewish stars of the Hungarian theater, who are the pride of the community, and into this comes someone talking about Judaism? It doesn't work.

A leading *kiruv* lecturer came here and the backlash was horrendous. Long afterwards, people kept talking about the "racist" lecturer that had come. Here, the only formula that works is not to push and slowly teach whoever is interested. It's tiring and frustrating; there's no feedback and one feels he has no effect, but slowly, people learn about the *chagim*,



Rav Yehoshua Domen (R.) in the shul.



Rav Keleti speaking at the community's Chanukah *mesibah*.



Dancing after the *shiur*.



Rav Keleti (R.) and Rav Yeshaya Domen (C.) at the *sheva brachos* of one of the congregants.



A *shiur* in the shul.



The Bostoner Rebbe, Harav Mayer Horowitz, speaking to the *kehillah*.

they come a bit to *tefillah*, then maybe put on *tefillin*.

"It goes very slowly, but consistently. This is Rav Keleti's way and, *baruch Hashem*, it's succeeding," Gabor says.

He should know. Gabor is a prime example. His wife also began learning from Rav Keleti, and no less than four years went by from her first *shiur* to her decision to make her kitchen kosher. Gabor learned from Rav Keleti and today teaches others in town. He is currently working on a doctoral thesis based on the *Iggeres HaRamban*.

Others attribute Rav Keleti's success to the fact that he has a committee of youths of the *kehillah* with whom he takes counsel before introducing anything new.

"With this we hit on the right format, and this brings the cooperation of the wider public," explains Gabor.

Rav Keleti's *kehillah* numbers 130 people, at various levels of observance. Three of them now teach at other synagogues in Budapest. Participants are by and large from the upper classes. They are educated and come with an eagerness to learn.

There's 30-year-old Dennis, head of the second-largest construction company in Hungary, with degrees in business administration from Irish and Swedish universities, who as a youth did not even know he was Jewish.

Then came the fateful day that he called a fellow student a "dirty Jew." Fortunately, the teacher was also Jewish, and raised the matter with Dennis' parents.

"That night my father called me over and told me, 'First of all, never call anyone dirty, and secondly, you're also Jewish,'" Dennis recalls. "It hit me like a ton of bricks, but even a year later, all I knew was that I was Jewish. Nothing more."

After beginning Jewish studies with Rav Keleti, Dennis spent two years learning non-stop (not even for field trips, he says) in a Yerushalayim yeshivah. Today, Dennis gives *shiurim* on *Gemara* and *hashkafah*.

There's Hope

While the ignorance is often shocking, there are reasons to be hopeful. One is Hungarian manners — no matter how assimilated, the Jews of Budapest show respect to Rav Keleti, and this itself brings them to listen to him attentively.

One stark example happened when Gabor got married and the whole community turned out. At the festivities, Rav Keleti asked a Jewish officer in the Hungarian Army to put the *chassan* on his shoulder. The officer immediately did so and danced with gusto. Later, someone whispered to Rav Keleti that this officer had recently undergone a serious back operation. Rav Keleti asked the officer why he had agreed, and the latter replied, "Since when do you say no to a rabbi?"

"This, in my opinion, is the secret of Hungarian Jewry," says Rav Keleti. "This was something I received from my parents, and this was always a trademark of Hungarian Jews — complete loyalty to and reverence for the Rav. This remains a characteristic of descendants of Hungarian Jews,



The Makova Rav conducting a *tisch* for Rav Keleti's *kehillah* in Budapest.



Harav Keleti making *havdalah* after a *Shabbaton*.



Gabor speaking at *pesichah*

and it is still palpable among the Jews of Hungary today, despite their distance from *Yiddishkeit*."

Efforts on a Host of Fronts

Rav Keleti helps his students each step of the way. For example, he sees to it that those with some connection to the community get a 50-percent discount at the kosher grocery store.

"This gets them used to buying there, and if they come once a month, they'll eventually stop buying at other stores entirely," he says.

Every so often, Rav Keleti takes his community on a *Shabbaton*, which they spend as guests of an established Jewish *kehillah*. Then there's *Hamaayan*, a monthly publication that Rav Keleti publishes with the help of others from the community. *Hamaayan* focuses on Hungary's majestic Jewish past, talks about the *chagim*, and describes local activities that were held or which are planned. Hundreds of copies are read throughout Budapest, and questionnaires show much positive feedback.

The fruits of his manifold efforts can be seen right now in

Elul, when dozens of youths from Hungary are learning in yeshivos in Yerushalayim.

While Rav Keleti is not the type to draw attention to himself, many within his community see what he's done as beyond the realm of the natural. *Gedolei Yisrael*, particularly those originally from Hungary, urge him to continue.

The Bostoner Rebbe, *shlita*, spoke before the community, as did the Makova Rav, *shlita*, who even held an emotionally charged *tisch* for Rav Keleti's students.

Far away from his family, even further from his friends and *talmidim* — not to mention his *Rosh Yeshivah* with whom he used to speak regularly — the pictures of grandchildren that fill Rav Keleti's room do not cure the homesickness. The plastic bags of food he brings from his wife's kitchen — his sole source of food in Hungary — are unable to impart the taste of home, which begs the question: *Where do you find the strength for all this?*

Rav Keleti sighs.

"It's certainly not easy. There are hard times, but there are also good times; many of them. But



Engaging the community in *simchah shel mitzvah*.



Rav Keleti after delivering a *shiur* on the sugya of *chatichah naaseis neveilah*.



Kehillah members listening to the Rav's words



Slowly and with patience is Rav Keleti's proven formula to the soul of his *talmidim*.

besides that, I ask, how can I leave here? In less than a generation, 90,000 Jews will be lost to their people without a trace. How can I watch this happen and do nothing about it?

"Sometimes I feel like Harav Michael Ber Weissmandl, who witnessed the Holocaust and cried out bitterly, but his cry was not heard. I'm here watching the Jewish community sink into

oblivion, and if I'm able to transmit to them this message, I shouldn't do so?"

The answer comes in the form of Gabor, Dennis and many others who received the message that ultimately brought them home.

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