

Rolling Up Their Sleeves and Doing It On Their Own

Yesodei HaTorah Hands-On Study Program Leads to Independence

When it comes to beginner learning programs, Mitch Cohen considers himself something of a "veteran." He's been to lectures and classes, and he has learned one-on-one and in groups with rabbis. Frankly, though, he was getting tired of being lectured to.

"I wanted to learn how to learn," he says, "and I knew I wasn't alone."

Mr. Cohen, a 31-year-old real estate investor and father of three, was instrumental in helping the Denver Community Kollel establish Yesodei HaTorah, a new night school dedicated to giving local Jewish men the skills to learn classic Torah literature on their own from the original texts. The program is patterned after the highly successful Yesodei HaTorah program founded in Baltimore in 1990.

The Kollel's school opened its doors in October, with a Beginner's Mishna class taught by Rabbi Avi Wilen, a long-time Hillel Academy Gemara instructor. Fourteen people have enrolled.

On one level, the class is about getting skills.

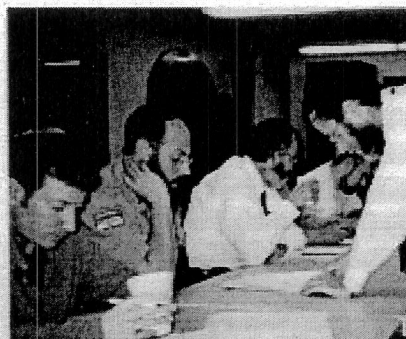
"By the end of the semester, students will have had a basic introduction to Hebrew grammar - verb construction, prefixes and suffixes," says Rabbi Wilen. "They are building a vocabulary list of common Hebrew words that you find in Mishna and Gemara. And they are getting an introduction to many basic concepts that you encounter in Mishna and Gemara."

This was just the type of class Buzz Krovitz, a 66-year-old retiree, was looking for. Mr. Krovitz has been studying for the last five years at his synagogue, Aish/Ahavas Yisroel, and has taken Hebrew classes at University of Denver. His goal is to have the ability to learn Talmud from the source, in the original Aramaic.

"I never learned how to study Talmud properly," says Mr. Krovitz. "This class is giving me the structure - the key words and phrases - to learn Talmud the right way."

And though the students are only halfway through the semester, they are already beginning to see real progress.

"Before this class, my students knew the theory, the philosophy. Now they are rolling up their sleeves and seeing how it's done," says Rabbi Wilen. "And there is a great sense of 'I get it now.'"



(L to R) David Zalkin, Marty Boxer, David Solomon and Vladimir Dudov with instructor Rabbi Avi Wilen at the Yesodei HaTorah Beginner's Mishna Class.

For David Zalkin, a 24-year-old teacher and pre-med student, the strides he's making at Yesodei HaTorah are very real - and they are helping him in other areas.

"Thus far, I am learning the basics of Mishnaic language, structure, and reasoning," says Mr. Zalkin. "My general improvement in Hebrew language skills already seems

to be enriching my davening and other learning, as I find myself grasping more and more of the original Hebrew."

Mitch Cohen sees so much improvement from one class to the next that he wishes classes would be held twice a week, not just once.

"My skills are growing and I can see the progress," he says. "It's very encouraging - I can see independence on the horizon."

And that, on a deeper level, is what Yesodei HaTorah is all about.

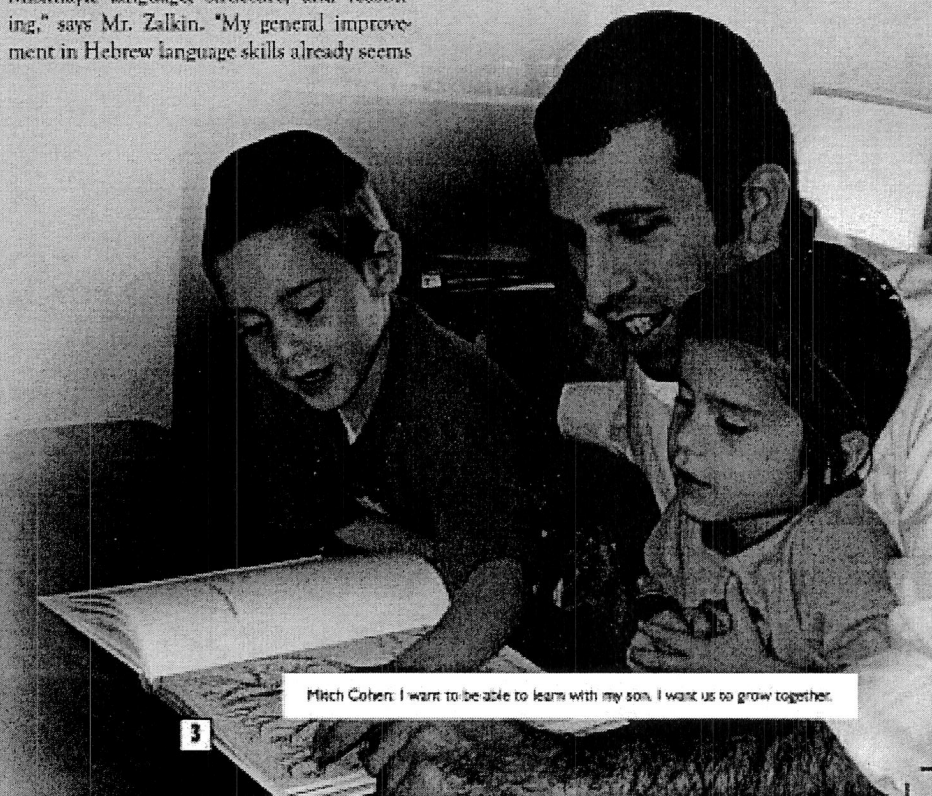
For Buzz Krovitz, independence means having the ability to join a Daf Yomi - Page-a-Day-Talmud - class in the spring.

For David Zalkin, it means having the skills he needs when he heads to a Jerusalem yeshiva this January to further his Torah studies.

And for Mitch Cohen, it's about his - and his family's - future.

"I want to be able to learn with my son," he says. "When he starts learning Mishnayos in school, I want to be able to sit across the table from him and explain it."

"I want us to grow together."



Mitch Cohen: I want to be able to learn with my son. I want us to grow together.

