

A Midnight Life-Changing Experience

I am married and live in Beitar Ilit, a small community just outside of Jerusalem. I work at home as a website designer, which is really how my problem began. Whenever I needed a break, I would either surf the web or play some idiotic computer game. The more time I spent with my computer, the less enthusiasm I had for anything else. I would rush through my *davening* to get back to the computer as quickly as possible. Limud Torah became a thing of the past. My life slowly became cold and dry - mechanical, like a computer.

My family life suffered. Shabbos was spent eating and sleeping, and, of course, reading the paper from cover to cover. Of course I went to shul, and took my two sons with me, but my heart wasn't in the *davening*. Most of the time I was outside, talking to my friends.

By the time I finished "work," my wife and family was sound asleep and I would rush to catch the latest *minyán* for *Maariv*. Afterward, my friends and I would stand outside the shul, smoking and passing the time. The following morning I could barely manage to roll out of bed in time to *daven Shacharis*, again, with the last *minyán*. I'd race through *davening* to begin working, and after surfing the web and checking my e-mail, I'd actually get down to my latest project.

I was on a treadmill, and I couldn't get off. Physically, I was alive. But spiritually, I felt dead; lifeless.

Our marriage was falling apart. I was so wrapped up in my computer that I never had a free minute to help my wife with the children, or, even more important, to talk with her and share my dream with her. But then again, I really didn't have any dreams. They had all disappeared into cyberspace.

That's the person I was when the story I'm about to tell you happened.

It was two o'clock in the morning. My friends and I had exhausted all the local politics and were about to start walking home when we noticed that the lights were on at the neighborhood shul. As we came closer, we realized that the shul was full of men studying Torah. "Why in the world are they learning at this hour of the night?" we asked each other.

I went inside to have a look. The room was crowded with some 60 men learning with tremendous diligence. They looked like they were so full of life and happiness; it was obvious that they were enjoying every second of their learning. I was astounded. I can only describe what I saw as palpable *simchah!*

I went over to one of the men and asked, "What's going on? Why is everyone learning at this *meshugeneh* hour of night?"

He explained that this was Kollel Chatzos, and that the *kollel* learns each



24 hours of Torah, *Tefillah* and *Avodas Hashem* around the clock.

night from midnight until dawn.

I couldn't believe that in my generation there exist men who actually devote their nights to *limud Torah!* In front of such greatness, I felt embarrassed to be wasting my days and nights doing nothing. I noticed Yaakov, an old friend from my yeshiva days, sitting on a low stool, holding a *sefer* and crying like a small child. I went over to see what *sefer* he was learning, and, much to my shock, realized that he was reciting *Tikkun Chatzos*. Believe it or not, I had never even seen a *Tikkun Chatzos* before. I had only heard of its existence from stories about *tzaddikim* of old. The moment he finished I asked him, "Do you really learn here every night? I thought you had a job working in the bookstore."

As Yaakov stood up to remove a *gemara* from the bookshelf he responded, "I do. But I go to bed early so that I can devote these hours to *limud Torah*." Yaakov took down another *gemara* and said, "Instead of wasting time talking, let's learn."

I felt a bit out of place. It had been a long time since I had last opened a *sefer*, and I was afraid I'd make a fool of myself.

Yaakov understood my hesitation. "Don't worry, here at Kollel Chatzos no one is trying to be the '*shpitz*.' Our learning is *mamash* for Hashem. The *Zohar* states that when people learn between the hours of *chatzos* and dawn, the *Shechinah*, together with the *tzaddikim* in Gan Eden, come down to listen to the sweet sound of that learning. That's the power of Torah studied during these holy hours."

Yaakov paused for a few moments and then continued, "Can't you feel the excitement in the air? The men sitting here are regular people, like myself. Some hold down full-time jobs, some learn in *kollel*, some are major Torah scholars, some are not, but they are all here because they have learned that *limud Torah* during the auspicious hours of *chatzos* brings them close to the *Shechinah*. They feel Hashem in their lives, in a way that they never did before!"

Prior to our learning, Yaakov stated, "We are learning for the *refuah* of Yitzchak ben Yocheved."

"The *Rosh Kollel* arranges for each of us to have a Yissaschar-Zevulun partner," he explained. "My partner supports me, and in exchange, he receives part of the merit of my *limud Torah* and I pray for him. It's a win-win situation."

Yaakov and I started learning together. I have never learned with such *geshmakheit!* I was alive with Torah, and it was amazing!

While we were deep in the *sugya*, the *Rosh Kollel*, Rav Yehoshua Deutsch, *shlita*, gave a loud *klop* on the *bimah* and announced, "Dear friends! One of our loyal

supporters just called to request that we *daven* for his father. At this very moment he's being wheeled into the operating room." Everyone immediately stood up and tearfully began reciting *Tehillim*. Then a *Mi Sheberach* was said and the name of the sick person mentioned. After that, we returned to our learning. We didn't waste time talking.

I must have looked confused, because Yaakov explained to me that this happens almost every night. Rav Duetsch receives requests for prayers from throughout the world. The men of Kollel Chatzos *daven*, and people see *yeshuos!*

We continued learning until it was time to *daven* in the sunrise *minyán*. As we closed our *sefarim*, I heard several of the men reciting the *Korbonos* prior to *davening*. I could hear the yearning for the Beis Hamikdash in their voices. *Shacharis* was amazing. Although it was a regular weekday *Shacharis*, it felt like Yom Kippur.

I returned home a different person. For once I didn't feel like a walking dead man. But when I said good morning to my wife, she gave me a strange look and, in a voice dripping with sarcasm, retorted, "Good morning to you - and where were you all night?"

Instead of trying to explain, I did something I hadn't done in years - I helped her with the children. After they left the house, I told her what I had experienced the previous night.

The following Thursday night I finished work early. After helping my wife with the children and eating a quick supper, I went to bed early, so that I could arise at midnight to learn with my friend, Yaakov. Again, I felt the excitement and the sense of connection; it was unbelievable. After that, I was hooked, and Thursday nights were devoted to *limud Torah* at *chatzos*.

That was just the beginning. Before long, I was getting up early each morning for the sunrise *minyán*. The powerful *davening* impacted my entire day. Slowly but surely, the direction of my life was changing.

After half a year of spiritual growth - and lots of hard work (after all, true change is never easy), I decided to join the *kollel*. But when I asked Rav Deutsch if he'd accept me, he hid his utmost to discourage me, explaining that he has not yet arranged a Yissaschar-Zevulun partner for all of the *avreichim* presently learning at the *kollel*, so that if I joined, it would be without financial remuneration. I decided to join anyway.

Today, I am a very active member of "Kehillat Chatzos," the Kollel Chatzos community centered around our new

Established in 2001, the Kollel Chatzos Nachlas Yehoshua Center is located on Keneset Yechezkel Street, Beitar Ilit. At 12:30 sharp, the *kollel* members arrive from Beitar, Beit Shemesh and Jerusalem to recite *Tikkun Chatzos* before starting to learn. *Kollel* concludes with *Shacharis* at sunrise. Once a week, the entire *kollel* travels to the Kosel and Kever Rochel to pray for the names given by their supporters, and that are listed in the *kollel's kvittel*.

The *kollel* is funded solely by people who want the merit of *limud Torah* at *chatzos*, either through a Yissaschar-Zevulun partnership, through dedicating a night or week of learning or through a regular monthly contribution.

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Or online: www.kollelchatzot.com

Checks can be sent to
Freedman Family
1540 40th St.
Brooklyn N.Y. 11218

Or to POB 30067
Beitar Ilit, Israel

All donations are U.S. tax deductible
Dedicate one night of learning in honor of a *vacht nacht*, a *yahrtzeit*, a wedding, a bar/bas mitzvah, or to commemorate any other important date.

building. On Shabbos, my children and I go together to the beautiful Kollel Chatzos Shabbos *minyán* (which is not at sunrise!) as well as the weekly *Minchah* and *Maariv minyanim*. There are so many things going on at our shul - Torah classes, children's programs, programs for teens at risk, as well as a daytime *kollel*, and, of course, Kollel Chatzos. There's always something going on - fuel to fire my passion for Torah and *mitzvos*.

Now that my life revolves around Torah learning (yes, I still hold down a job, but now I work to live, rather than live to work) life at home is completely different. My wife and children are proud of me. They respect me for who I've become, and that makes a huge difference in the way I feel about myself.

People often ask my wife how she manages with my crazy, upside-down schedule. After all, after putting in a full day at work, I go to bed early each night to be able to wake up refreshed at midnight. All I can say is that my wife is ecstatic. Yes, that's the right word, ecstatic. In the "olden days," when my life revolved around my computer, my wife and family were peripheral. We almost never talked, and when we did, it was usually about money. Now, although my schedule is packed, I make sure to find time for my family. Every morning, after I return home from *davening vasikin*, I spend half an hour or so helping my wife with the children. After breakfast I take a short nap (I am human, after all!) before starting work. And Shabbos - well, Shabbos is Shabbos the way it's supposed to be, a day when, together with my wife and children, we connect to the Alm-ghty. Our Shabbos *seudos* are brimming with *divrei Torah* and *zemiros*.

Every day, I thank the Alm-ghty for allowing me to be part of the very special community of Kehillat Chatzos.

Although only 34, Rav Yehoshua Meir Deutsch, *shlita*, a resident of Beitar Ilit, is founder and Rav of the Nachlas Yehoshua Beis Medresh in Beitar Ilit. A graduate of the Erloy Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Rav Deutch devotes his life to teaching Torah and working with kids at risk. Eleven years ago he realized his dream of establishing Kollel Chatzos, and since then he has literally worked around the clock to raise the funds to support the Torah scholars who study there. Four years ago he founded a *halachah kollel*. Eight months ago his dream of constructing a building to house both his *kollelim*, a true *mikdash me'at* where Torah is learned around the clock, was finally realized with the inauguration of Kollel Chatzos' first wing.