

Teaching practical wisdom to spiritual leaders

Two rabbis launch a program with a toolbox of skills for the educated but untrained rabbi

By JESSICA STEINBERG | October 21, 2012, 6:54 am |

Israel's rabbinic landscape can be treacherous territory, but two Modi'in rabbis aim to help community rabbis navigate the terrain with Barkai, a center for practical rabbinics.

The Modi'in organization was officially launched on Monday as 20 carefully chosen students, all ordained rabbis from around the country, began a two-year weekly course of study that aims to create a "toolbox" of rabbinic skills that will help make the modern Israeli rabbi more relevant, said Rabbi Shlomo Sobol, one of Barkai's two founders.

"We want to be a trade school for rabbis," said Rabbi David Fine, Sobol's partner, an American-born rabbi who received his rabbinic ordination from the Joseph Straus Rabbinical Seminary in Efrat, Israel, and worked as a congregational rabbi in Wisconsin and Kansas before making aliya and moving to Modi'in. "You need to have skills in order to do this job."

Sobol, 42, is an eighth-generation Jerusalemite who received his rabbinic ordination from the Orthodox Merkaz HaRav yeshiva and later spent four years in Detroit, Michigan, as the rabbi of a kollel, a center for full-time adult Torah study. Upon returning to Israel, Sobol and his family moved to Modi'in, where they joined a young congregation that eventually asked him to be their rabbi. (This is a common albeit slightly haphazard method for hiring a congregational rabbi in Israel.)

"I saw in the States that the rabbis actually learned the rabbinate," said Sobol. "They knew how to be professionals, and as a rabbi in Modi'in, I felt I just didn't have enough training."

As Sobol likes to say, he knew a lot about Jewish law, but not how to take care of his congregation. Fine, who was teaching at a hesder yeshiva and at a Modi'in community center, was a member of Sobol's congregation and the two spent much time discussing the absence of practical rabbinic training for Israeli rabbis.

"We're trying to create rabbis who are more approachable," said Fine, adding that he learned about rabbinic models that work while growing up in the US and as a working congregational rabbi. "A rabbi is already relevant to most religious people, but if you're a secular person and are having some kind of issue, we want you to come to the rabbi as well, whether you're religious or not. We're going back to the system of the ancient rabbinate, rabbis who are community leaders."

When they first placed the advertisements for Barkai in local synagogue newsletters, they were overwhelmed by the response and had to quickly close the application process. They looked for rabbis from all over the country, between the ages of 28 and 38, and while most congregational rabbis only have part-time salaries from their synagogues, Sobol and Fine knew they wanted rabbis who were interested in working full-time for their communities.

Last year, Fine and Sobol raised \$120,000 in seed money from private donors to get Barkai off the ground, and then another \$400,000 for the organization's current budget, which includes both of their part-time salaries. At Barkai, which will be based at Sobol's Modi'in synagogue, rabbis will study seven hours every Monday, gaining 500 academic hours over the course of two years and receiving a modest stipend, which may only cover travel expenses for those coming from afar.

The lecturers at Barkai are experts in various subjects and will be covering issues of practical halacha, such as fertility treatments, chaplaincy and aspects of household gardening.

"We spent a lot of time talking to rabbis to gain a sense of what was needed in our curriculum," said Fine. "A lot of these guys learned in a yeshiva for 15 years, but they need to learn practical aspects of Jewish law."

"It's not continuing education," added Sobol. "It's training."

One of the Barkai students is Rabbi Tal Marom, the 36-year-old rabbi of a new, small Modi'in synagogue who was hired when he began praying at the synagogue, but found there was a lot he needed to learn about being a congregational rabbi in an Israeli synagogue.

"A congregational rabbi in our times is not a rabbi who looks down on the congregation from above," said Marom. "Knowledge about Jewish law can now be gotten from so many places, but a community rabbi is about being a tour guide. If a rabbi wants to be relevant and help develop the congregation, he has to know how to do it. He can't just sit back."

It's a revelatory kind of remark from an Israeli rabbi, considering that not so long ago, synagogues here were largely restricted to being houses of worship. But there has been an awakening, said Sobol, and Israelis now expect a more personal approach from their rabbi.

"We wonder sometimes if it's because of a couple of Americans in the congregations that cause this, but whatever is causing it, it's happening," he said.

In a city like Modi'in, which has a city rabbi — Rabbi David Lau, who is the son of Tel Aviv chief rabbi Yisrael Lau, Barkai's president — community rabbis "complete" the city rabbi, said Sobol.

"Our Rabbi Lau goes around on Shabbat and speaks at 20 shuls, but he can't get to all the people," said Sobol. "When I became my synagogue's rabbi, I went to Rav Lau and told him, 'I'm your right hand.'"

Sobol and Fine would like to develop alumni programs, connecting rabbis to communities and pushing the idea of more rabbi-led communities. They also wanted a mix of students, rabbis from

the hard religious right and those from the more laid-back kibbutz and moshav communities, offering a mainstream approach “but with a taste of what’s out there,” added Fine.

Rabbi Shahar Buzhak, another Barkai student, will be coming from Moshav Ein Habesor, a secular community in the western Negev, where he has been the rabbi for the last four and a half years.

The secular moshav did not want Rabbi Buzhak to settle in the community, but he and his wife, who had been living in Sderot after leaving a Gaza Strip settlement in 2005, wanted a different kind of community, even if wasn’t an obvious fit. Rabbi Buzhak has slowly created a community of religious and secular people — 150 people came to Yom Kippur services a few weeks ago — but he feels he doesn’t always know how to deal with certain issues.

“We’re young and we get very complicated questions,” he said. “Questions about Jewish law and about life. I need to know how to deal with those questions.”

If the Israeli rabbinate were training their rabbis, “we wouldn’t be doing this,” said Fine.

“You can’t be a hair stylist without a certificate, or a lawyer or doctor or teacher, so why can you be a rabbi without any training?” he asked. “We are saying that in order to enter into people’s lives and deal with delicate issues, you need to undergo some training.”

“We’re offering tools to each and every rabbi, whatever belief system he comes from,” said Sobol, adding that Barkai applicants have to have been ordained by the Israeli rabbinate. “The tools will work for everyone.”

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