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Teaching practicality

By JOSH HASTEN
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The Barkai organization's new program trains a select group of rabbis in issues they face on a daily basis.

'Would you leave your health in the hands of a doctor who went to medical school but didn't actually have any experience with patients because of a failure to complete his or her residency?' asks Rabbi David Fine rhetorically. Accordingly, he continues, "who would want to go and ask a rabbi a question pertaining to his or her spiritual well-being [if that rabbi] only has *smicha* [rabbinical ordination] but doesn't have the practical skills necessary to truly serve as a community leader and adviser?" The American-born Fine, who made aliya in 2008, is the co-founder of the Barkai organization, a Modi'in-based educational center for practical rabbinics.

He and Jerusalem native Rabbi Shlomo Sobol, who serves as the pulpit rabbi for the Kehillat Sha'arei Yona Menachem synagogue in Modi'in's Buchman neighborhood, created Barkai "with the purpose of training ordained Israeli rabbis so they can learn the practicalities of becoming community and pulpit rabbis," says Fine.

Sobol came up with the idea after serving as an emissary in the Detroit Jewish community and seeing how professionally the rabbi ran his congregation.

"I know that in Yeshiva University they have a program in which rabbis are trained how to practically lead their communities, and I thought to myself, 'Haval [it's a shame] that we don't have anything like that here in Israel.'"

Thanks to their initiative – and with the support of the organization's president, former chief rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau – a select group of 20 rabbis from the country's religious Zionist world arrived in Modi'in last month to begin a two-year course.

The classes, totaling 500 hours of academic instruction, meet once a week for seven hours a day and focus on practical issues that community rabbis face daily, including life-cycle events, medical ethics, and technology in Halacha.

"The courses are being taught by top educators in all relevant fields, including medicine, education, law, and mental health," says Fine. "These are professional teachers who understand both Halacha and its implementation in today's world."

One of the major curriculum topics focuses on the growing field of chaplaincy, so rabbis can learn how best to provide comfort and support for hospital patients and those living in old age homes.

According to Fine, *bikur holim*, or visiting the sick, "is in actuality a science." As such, he continues, "we have partnered with professional chaplaincy organizations who come to Barkai in order to teach our students the tools of the trade."

Some of the other topics on the Barkai sample course listing include public speaking and body language, life-coaching, supervision and management, public relations, and leadership principles.

In addition to the classroom hours, participants will take part in mentored field work in hospitals, old-age homes, prisons and schools. Barkai will also run a placement service that matches up communities with religious leaders who are appropriate for their needs. In addition, it will host conferences to enable rabbis to share their experiences and exchange information, raise awareness on important issues, and supplement their knowledge and professional skills.

Furthermore, the organization runs mini-courses for the wives of Barkai fellows, since community members often call on the spouses of communal rabbis with questions.

RABBI ZIV Abramowitz, a teacher at the hesder yeshiva in Dimona, makes the weekly trek to Modi'in to participate in the course. He says he heard about the program from his mother, who saw an advertisement in one of the Torah portion pamphlets distributed weekly in synagogues across the country.

Abramowitz served as a community rabbi in Gedera for three years and has aspirations to return to the pulpit.

"I signed up for the Barkai program because I want to improve my skill set in certain areas," he says. "For starters, I would like to polish my public speaking skills. I also need to learn about the latest technologies, as well as the current state of affairs concerning medicine in Halacha. Plus, I need to brush up on the practicalities of family and ritual purity."

Although the program has just started, he adds, "I already have the sense that once I finish I will have the tools necessary to better run a community and really make a difference."

"There are so many topics and issues that rabbis face out there," says Fine. "Laws of planting in the Land of Israel, mezuzot, how to tell if a succa is kosher, kashrut, etc. Plus, rabbis need to be up to date on all the latest gadgets in the kitchen vis-à-vis Shabbat. These are all issues rabbis learn from a theoretical perspective during... the ordination process, but in this country they are not up to date in these areas."

Sobol gives a few other examples of issues for which rabbis may not be prepared.

"I would guess that 99 percent of rabbis don't know the practical laws in regard to mikve [the ritual bath] or have even seen a kosher mikve. Also, while rabbis here learn the laws of Shabbat, what about the specifics of a dud shemesh [solar hot water heater] on Shabbat? These are just a few of the many topics that we delve into."

"Or marriage issues," Fine chimes in. "Many times a rabbi is the first address for couples with marital problems, but he has to know when he can or can't help. And in the latter case, the issues may need to be brought to the attention of a certified marriage professional."

The list of rabbinic responsibilities and areas of expertise seem endless, but both Fine and Sobol are optimistic that Barkai is a step in the right direction when it comes to helping rabbis run their communities more effectively.

"It used to be that new rabbis would serve as apprentices alongside greater rabbis with more experience," says Sobol. "Since that doesn't exist anymore in this country, our program is like their apprenticeship."

Adds Fine, "This approach – where rabbis learn and then disseminate the answers to practical halachic questions for the benefit of their community members – is really what the rabbinate has been doing throughout the ages."