



The World Outside, the World Inside, and the Intersection Between

Rabbi David Keleti: A Jew with a Mission

Hashem does not create doubles. Each of us bears the imprint of the *tzelem Elokim*, and yet each of us is different. No two Jews are born with precisely the same mission in life.

The discovery of that mission is one of our most important tasks in life. Yet it is far from easy. We are not born with a mission statement stamped on. Sometimes we have to rely on the slightest of hints.

Rabbi David Keleti did not discover his particular mission until he was well into his 50s. It is not that he had done nothing until then. He was a respected *maggid shiur* in Yeshivas Me'oros HaTorah in the Jerusalem suburb of Telshe Stone.

But when he considered his capabilities, Rabbi Keleti realized that he possessed a rare intersection of two unrelated skill sets. On the one hand, he had been *zocheh* to learn Torah at a high level for decades, beginning as a close student of Rav Nochum Partzovitz, the late *rosh yeshivah* of Mir in Jerusalem. On the other, he is a native speaker of Hungarian. He was born in the Debrecen region of Hungary and made aliyah with his parents when he was eight.

Besides the rare combination of Torah scholarship and fluency in Hungarian, the feelings of a child of Holocaust survivors are the third element driving Rabbi Keleti. His father lost his wife and three children in Auschwitz, and was already 47 years old when he married a second time to his first wife's younger sister. Growing up, Rabbi Keleti heard from his mother how the Jews of her town of Foldes had to leave the keys to their homes on a table prior to boarding the trains to Auschwitz, while their gentile neighbors clapped.

TODAY THERE ARE approximately 90,000 Jews in Budapest, Hungary's capital and largest city. Even in the time of the Chasam Sofer, Budapest was a Neolog stronghold. Virtually all the observant Jews remaining in Hungary after the Holocaust fled during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution before it was put down by the Soviets. Thus, most of the Jews remaining in Hungary today have been cut off from any trace of Judaism for three generations, and in many cases much longer.

One of Rabbi Keleti's poignant childhood memories is of his piano teacher in Haifa, another Hungarian immigrant. One spring, the man asked him, "What exactly is this Pesach that everyone is talking about?" That question showed him how far removed from any trace of Torah a Jew can be.

Many of Rabbi Keleti's students grew up unaware that they were

Jewish. Dennis, the CEO of Hungary's second-largest construction company, only discovered that he was Jewish when he called a classmate a "dirty Jew" in the midst of a playground scuffle. His teacher reported the incident to Dennis's father, who took him aside that evening and told him that he too was Jewish. Another of Rabbi Keleti's students was plagued from the age of 16 by the question, "Who am I?" She brought Rabbi Keleti a document in which her great-grandmother was listed as an Israelite. But her maternal grandmother was baptized at birth and listed as a Catholic. Yet somehow in her quest for identity she found her way to Rabbi Keleti.

Unawareness of even the basic fact that one is Jewish is not uncommon in Hungary. *Mishpacha* recently ran a feature on Csanad Szegedi, who was once a rising star in the anti-Semitic Jobbik Party, until he discovered that he was Jewish.

SUCH IS THE COMMUNITY to which Rabbi Keleti first decided to bring Torah seven years ago. The original contact was made by a former *chavrusa*, Reb Shlomo Jacobson. Reb Shlomo introduced him to Rabbi Shlomo Mandel of Toronto, who supervises many of Albert Reichmann's projects in Eastern Europe, including a Jewish school in Budapest.

Originally, Rabbi Keleti traveled to Budapest one week a month to give *shiurim*. Subsequently, after consulting with Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv and *yblecht*"a Rav Aharon Leib Steinman, he opened a *kollel* with six *yungeleit* from Israel. Rav Elyashiv told him, "This is a matter of saving an entire *tzibbur*, a very great thing. It cannot be shirked."

Eventually, the *yungeleit* all returned to Israel because there were no suitable schools for their children in Budapest, and Rabbi Keleti found himself all alone. His wife does not speak Hungarian, and in any event, her Israeli paycheck is the family's only regular source of income.

He felt that he had no choice but to stay. To leave, he explained to me, would put him in the position of those who could have stopped the trains to Auschwitz but didn't. He understands completely the pain of Rav Michael Ber Weissmandl's unheeded cry. At one point, Rabbi Mandel confided to me, Rav Steinman had to order Rabbi Keleti not to mortgage his home to help finance the program.

When he first discovered his mission, Rabbi Keleti never dreamed that it would mean seeing his wife only every couple of months and his children and grandchildren even less frequently. But as



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painful as that separation is, interrupting the teaching of Torah that he loves to roam the globe in search of the money to keep his program going is even more so. At the outset, he reasoned that if he was willing to be *moser nefesh* to live in Budapest and could show results from his efforts, wealthy Jews with an even greater connection to Hungary than his would surely generously support his efforts.

Throughout Hungary, millions of dollars have been spent to restore beautiful old shuls to be seen only by the gentile caretaker and an occasional visitor from abroad in towns long empty of Jews. Similarly, *kivrei avos* have been refurbished at great expense. But not a fraction of the money lavished on the memory of Jews who once lived in Hungary is being spent on reviving 90,000 living Jews, the last flickering remnants of a once-glorious community. (Rabbi Keleti's organization, Lativ, stands for *Lmaan Tichyeh Yahadus B'Hungaria* — To Revive Judaism in Hungary.)

HAD RABBI KELETI seen no success, his frustration at the time spent away from Budapest would be less. But he has built a community of 130 Jews, all of whom are learning every week and many every day. That community includes an extremely high percentage of academics and professionals. Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, who was a guest lecturer at a recent Shabbaton, told me that his translator held a PhD in math from Cambridge University. He was extremely impressed by the sophistication of the questions asked after his lectures.

Rabbi Keleti's dignified, soft-spoken demeanor, absent the slightest trace of charisma, appears to be well-suited to his Hungarian students. "They cannot be pushed," he tells me. For months after a famous guest speaker spoke passionately against assimilation, his students could not stop talking about the "racist" rabbi.

Only Torah learning works, Rabbi Keleti has found. And that is what he offers, day and night, in the facilities of an office building owned by Israeli businessman Motti Zisser. There, Rabbi Keleti is to be found teaching and learning all day when he is in Budapest. Sometimes he steals a few hours to learn in *chavrusa* with Rabbi Shmuel Yehoshua Doren, a Hungarian-born *avreich* who learned for many years in Yeshivas Givat Shaul, before returning to Hungary out of the same sense of obligation that drives Rabbi Keleti. But most often he is giving *shiurim*.

In place of the *kollel* of Israeli *avreichim*, Rabbi Keleti now has a *kollel* consisting of seven Hungarian-born *avreichim*, whom he has nurtured along the way. Three of his students lecture in other shuls in Budapest. Over the past few years, he has made 11 weddings between his students, probably twice the number of the rest of the small Orthodox community in Budapest. Every month he publishes 600 copies of *Maayanos*, a magazine for the community, with articles about the glorious history of Hungarian Jewry, the holidays, practical halachah, and upcoming communal events.

Rabbi Gottlieb told me that the effectiveness of Rabbi Keleti's method of connecting through Torah learning can be readily discerned. He came to Hungary for one of the periodic Shabbos retreats that Rabbi Keleti runs for his students. It took place in a castle transformed into a hotel on a scenic rural estate. During World War II, that particular castle served as the residence of Hungary's dictator, and many anti-Semitic decrees were signed there.

"You could see how totally attached to him his students were," says Rabbi Gottlieb. They quote him constantly: "Rabbi Keleti says this"; "Rabbi Keleti says that." Rav Aryeh Friedman, the *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Gedolah in Sao Paulo, was another recent scholar-in-residence at a Shabbos retreat. (Rabbi Mordechai Neugroschel, Rav Shalom Servernik, Rav Mordechai Friedman and our own Rabbi Moshe Grylak are other former guest lecturers.)

"I also built a yeshivah from five *bochurim* to 70," Rav Friedman told me. "But I had lots of help, particularly financial. If I make a Shabbaton, everything is fully arranged when I arrive, and all I have to worry about is my lecturers. Rabbi Keleti does everything. He *kashers* the kitchen, arranges the food, and oversees every little detail."

Besides the Shabbos retreats every year, Rabbi Keleti arranges a long trip to different Jewish population centers to give his students a sense of being part of the larger Jewish world. In Gateshead, Rabbi Akiva Ziskind played host. The men heard a *shiur* from Rav Eziel Rosenbaum, a native of Hungary and a *maggid shiur* in Gateshead Yeshivah. The women heard a talk in Hungarian from Rebbetzin Katz, wife of Rabbi Avrohom Katz, head of the Beis Chaya Rochel Seminary. They have also been hosted in Manchester by Rabbi Aaron Kampf of Aish HaTorah, and in London by the Jewish Learning Exchange, with *shiurim* from Rabbi Akiva Tatz.

FINDING ONE'S MISSION does not ensure that the path will be easy or even that one will be successful. But knowing that there is an important task in the world that by virtue of one's special circumstances no one else is as likely to achieve provides the most precious reward of all — the certainty that Hashem put one in the world for a purpose.

Rabbi David Keleti is the proof. ●