

LETTER FROM BUDAPEST

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LATIV: resowing the seeds of sanctity

For Rabbi David Keleti, the day of Erev Rosh Hashonoh, like every other day of the year, begins at sunrise. He is up early to set everything in motion for the members of his organization with whom he is in close contact. This day, however, promised to be the busiest of all the days of the passing year. Everything had to be ready and in great shape so that members, guests and talmidim would feel the welcoming aura and the pleasantly warm atmosphere of the evening seudah at Lativ.

For most Jews, the last day of the year is frantic. After all, the Big Day is coming: it is the time to enter the courtroom, each of us alone, and we need to be prepared, mentally and physically, for the Divine hearing. The last day is the time for the final stretches in cooking, procuring necessary items, learning and, for some, resting a bit.

Lativ is no different. The sounds of clanking, buzzing and humming have been emanating from the kitchen seemingly non-stop for days. Inside, you see the coordinated moves of kitchen staff chopping vegetables for the salads, opening bottles and stirring soup with ladles. The whole area is redolent with the smell of chicken soup and roast beef. The mashgichim work closely with the staff so that everything goes smoothly and will be ready before shekiah.

Outside, young volunteers set the

tables. Others prepare the sheets of songs to be distributed among the guests. One sees a group of students learning about the tefillos of the upcoming day. A family comes in to ask if they can make a last-minute registration for the seudos.

It is an eventful day. Yet, an ambience of serene but thrilling anticipation lingers in the air at the Lativ headquarters. You can almost touch –not just feel– the friendliness and camaraderie around.

Amid the usual frenzy of the day, Rav Keleti goes around and checks to see if everything is in order. It is usual to see him talking on the phone, making new year wishes to his family in Israel, students or supporters of Lativ. He is often stopped by students or staff asking halachic questions or about matters related to their private lives. Rav Keleti is never short of a smile and a kind word for everyone. He puts his mind and soul into every detail – and values the members of organization above all.

Being an organization in the heart of Budapest, the Hungarian capital of the once-flourishing centre of Yiddishkeit, Lativ has already become a household name for the young Hungarian Jews seeking to connect to the mesorah their family was cut off two generations earlier thanks to the Nazi and Communist regimes. The name itself –Lativ– is a Hebrew



roshei teivos for 'in order to revive Judaism in Hungary'. This acronym is a nod to the prosperous Jewish past that is no longer with us, but was once a reality, the optimistic hope in the future that the past can come back and the acknowledgement that the present requires gruelling work.

Rav Keleti is no stranger to hard work. A native of Debrecen, Hungary, his family fled to Israel when the revolution against the Soviet regime broke out in 1956. He worked his way up in Mir Yeshiva to be one of the top talmidim and in the closest circle of students of Rav Nachum Pertzowitz zt"l, the world-famous teacher and talmid chacham, a feat requiring determination, erudition and the desire for greatness. Today Rav Keleti is a leader of a burgeoning community that offers quality Torah education and builds up individual Jewish identities from scratch. He has facilitated the forming many families, all students of Lativ, who are now starting to have babies. Through Lativ, Judaism has begun to take firm roots in Budapest and if all goes well, everything is set for the Hungarian

capital to boast a prodigious learning, Chareidi community in the future.

When I ask him how he could muster the strength to achieve excellence both in the Torah world and kiruv, he laughs. 'Do you remember what I taught you about the person's best friend, the ego?' he asks me half-jokingly with the usual glee in his eyes. He stresses the word "best" so that it becomes clear how he meant it. Yes, I do remember. Rav Keleti often teaches in the name of Rav Shimon Shkop that the man starts with an ego that contains only himself. It is the task of every individual to enlarge the ego so that more and more people can fit in, first his family, then his community. Eventually, you have to arrive at the point when you feel that the whole world is under your responsible care. 'We are entrusted to take care of as many as we can' – I hear him say many times.

And Rav Keleti is not a man who does not practise what he preaches. Ten years ago, he left his position as a maggid shiur in an elite Israeli yeshiva gedola to devote his time and energy to build up a learning community in Budapest. His origin gave him two invaluable assets which predestined him to succeed: his staunch commitment to revive the Jewish life in his native land and his ability to speak Hungarian. He arrived in Budapest with the unconditional approval of leading gedolim, Rav Steinman ztl, Rav Eliyashiv ztl and Ibcl the Belzer Rebbe, yet with only very limited financial resources at his disposal. His vision was, and still is, to empower straying young Jews with the word of Torah, to instill in them the love of learning, and to provide them the language and learning skills to achieve excellence in Torah. 'You cannot build identity without sound knowledge,' he is wont to say. From the outset, in the first year, he formed groups of young university students to learn Derekh Hashem.



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