

# Goldin Opportunity



# “The Torah comes alive when you move to Israel”

Serving for 33 years as Rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Torah in Englewood, New Jersey, **Rabbi Shmuel Goldin** grew the congregation from 350 families to nearly 800 families, making Ahavath Torah one of the largest Orthodox congregations in America. Throughout his rabbinic career, Rabbi Goldin served for decades as an instructor of Bible and Philosophy at Yeshiva University and occupied numerous national leadership positions, including two terms as president of the Rabbinical Council of America. After retiring in 2017, Rabbi Goldin and his wife Barbara moved to Israel to continue to teach, write, and volunteer. While visiting his family in the United States, we asked Rabbi Goldin to reflect upon his time in the rabbinate, the future of Religious Zionism in America and his new life in Israel.

**T**hank you for taking the time to talk together today! Let's start by telling us about your childhood and how you ultimately came to be one of the leading pulpits rabbis in the United States.

My two grandfathers were significant influences in my life. My *zaide* Rabbi Hyman E. Goldin was an open-minded, renaissance Rabbi. Immigrating to America in 1900, he taught himself English, earned a law degree, opened a Jewish camp and a hotel in the Adirondack mountains, served as the principal of several Jewish schools, was a prison chaplain, and authored roughly fifty books, including his translation of the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* and the first Rabbi's Handbook (*Madrich*). He also wrote *The Case of the Nazarene Reopened*, a treatise in trial form, putting the Jews on trial after centuries of persecution (for which he studied

the Gospels in-depth, revealing major inconsistencies), and the *Dictionary of American Underworld Lingo* (co-authored with three convicts).

Rabbi Avraham “Alter” Poplack, my other grandfather, was much more rigidly Orthodox. Immigrating to Seattle in the 1920s, he became a significant figure in the Jewish community, serving as an educator for countless young men and women. He had been a roommate and close friend of Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky in the Slobodka Yeshiva and was instrumental in bringing Rabbi Yaakov and his family to America in 1937. When my *zaide* made Aliyah to Bnai Brak, I remember Rabbi Yaakov and his *rebbetzin* coming to see him off at the boat. When *zaide* Poplack visited us, he always tested me on Gemara, which I didn't particularly like, though I liked it when he said he was proud of me.

My parents came from very different backgrounds and met at Blue Sky Lodge Hotel, my *zaide* Goldin's hotel in the Adirondack Mountains. My mother, Pearl Poplack, was working as a nanny at the hotel when she met my father, Isaac Goldin. They fell in love, but my mother ended the relationship at summer's end, as my father was not

religiously observant at the time. My father, however, persisted and sought her out, promising to become fully observant, which he did. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky married them a year later, under a tree in the Adirondacks.

We grew up in a home that successfully merged the different views of my grandfathers; our home was very open-minded but also very *frum*. I, and all of my siblings, are orthodox; though I consider myself a centrist, compared to my siblings, I'm a left-winger!

The dual influences of my grandfathers shaped my approach to life and also to the rabbinate. I wanted to remain within the traditional world of *halachah*, but at the same time be open-minded and bring in as many people as I could. My kids have followed suit, taking different paths within orthodoxy.

But the truth is, I never made a conscious decision to become a pulpit rabbi; I was also interested in pursuing clinical psychology. I was studying at Yeshiva University and wanted to continue learning Torah, so I studied for *semicha*. After getting engaged to Barbara, I explored two jobs: teaching at Flatbush High School or moving to California to become Rabbi Maurice Lamm's youth director at Congregation Beth Jacob. Rabbi Lamm was interviewing people for the job at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. I said to Barbara: “We're not moving to California, but I've never seen the inside of the Waldorf Astoria!” On the day of the interview, I was shopping for the engagement ring with my sister. In the middle of Manhattan, my *yarmulke* blew away, and we couldn't find it. I told my sister: “I'll get a new *yarmulke* before the interview, but do me a favor and buy me a hat so I can cover my head until then.” So she bought me a ridiculous brown corduroy hat that was two sizes too big, and we continued shopping for the ring. But as it turned out, we were



Rabbi Goldin on arrival in Israel as a new *oleh*, with one of his grandchildren.

running late, and I didn't have time to get a new *yarmulke* before my interview with Rabbi Lamm. Wearing that hat, I walked into the Waldorf and knocked on Rabbi Lamm's door, and when he opened the door, I immediately blurted out: "Rabbi Lamm, I don't always wear this hat!" Rabbi Lamm was a very proper man and gave me a look that seemed to say, "who is this guy they're sending me now?" Halfway through the interview, he stopped and said to me: "Are you *sure* you don't always wear that hat?" That's how I ended up going to California for my first position as the "Assistant Rabbi in Charge of Youth."

From Los Angeles, I moved to Potomac, Maryland, where I was the Rabbi of Beth Shalom Congregation, which at that time was a branch of a shul in Washington, DC. After six years there, we wanted to return to the greater New York area, and I applied to several communities in the northeast.

Englewood was at the top of our list, but I was only 31 years old (with an afro!) and was shocked that I was even offered an interview.

The placement department at Yeshiva University told me: "Shmuel, there is no way you're going to get this job, but it will be a good experience for you to do the interview." So I went to the interview with nothing to lose, feeling very relaxed since I knew I had no shot at this job. I like being put on the spot, fielding complicated questions, and surprisingly, the interview went very well. About halfway through, I realized the committee was taking me seriously, and sure enough, they invited me back for a *proba* (Shabbat tryout).

For the Friday night of the *proba*, I was told to speak about something of Jewish interest – but not a *d'var Torah*. I went to the library and spent hours preparing a talk on "the state of the modern Orthodox community." A few hours before Shabbat, as I practiced the speech in the room where we were staying in Englewood, my wife says, "Boring. This is so boring. You can't give that talk!" So I didn't. I furiously rewrote the speech and gave a different talk – and won the job!

**Looking back on your forty years in the rabbinate, what are some of the vital life lessons you have learned? What advice would you offer young Jewish leaders in the Diaspora?**

In Englewood, I was the Rabbi of a sophisticated community that was ready to hear and listen – but needed to be convinced. When I first arrived, people were very concerned that I was turning the community to the right. It was a classic Modern Orthodox community that was afraid of anything they thought was new or “too religious.” The ongoing struggle for me was how to keep pushing the bar towards a deeper connection to Torah. I frequently asked myself, “how do I challenge people and make them think?”

Little by little, we developed a relationship of mutual respect. I learned an important rule: if a community believes that you are sincere and do your job well, they will respect you. Over the years, the community grew more seriously religious; more people came to minyan, learned Torah regularly, and performed monumental acts of *chesed*. It means a lot to me.

I tell many younger rabbis not to underestimate the importance of the Rabbi’s pastoral role, for it impacts everything they hope to accomplish. The more time the congregation spends with you in preparation for their Bar Mitzvah, at the hospital or the funeral, the more they will respect you. And they will listen more closely and receptively when you speak from the pulpit. I found that as time went by and I became closer to the community, I was able to speak about more complicated and sensitive issues from the pulpit.

**Although every pulpit rabbi shares a similar job description, what made your experience as Rabbi at Ahavath Torah unique?**

Among many other characteristics, the community really stands out in its commitment to Israel. During the First Intifada in the late 1980s, I gave a sermon on the verse in *Parashat Lech Lecha*, when G-d says to Abraham, קום, התהלך בארץ, “Arise, walk through the



Rabbi Shmuel and Barbara Goldin are honored for their 34 years at Ahavath Torah.

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land, through the length and breadth of it; for to you will I give it.” I said that for the Land of Israel to be ours, we must be able to walk safely in the land, something which Israelis could not take for granted during that difficult time. That was all I said; I never dreamed of taking it any further. But at the *kiddush*, a few members came up to me and said, “Rabbi, let’s go!”

That was our first mission to Israel, which led to a whole series of trips that we called “קום התהלך בארץ” missions. During every war and intifada that followed, we were one of the first American groups on the ground. I don’t know statistics, but I wouldn’t be surprised if we sent the most missions to Israel

of any community in America, which is an excellent tribute to the people of this community.

During the Second Intifada, as many of us organized rallies for Israel, a couple of congregants and I came up with a “crazy idea.” Wouldn’t it be fantastic, we thought, to do a rally for Israel in Israel itself? And so we raised money and offered people across America a heavily subsidized trip to Israel – \$500 for three days. The first time we had close to 500 people sign up from all over the country – from Iowa and Idaho! We even had a few Christians join the trips; we had no idea who was joining. On the second trip, over 600 people participated. On each of these



With Pope Francis, who is looking at one of Rabbi Goldin's books.

trips, we organized a rally for Israel in the Old City of Jerusalem. They were truly exceptional events. I still meet people who tell me it was their first time in Israel and how it changed their lives.

**Throughout your career in America, you've both witnessed and played an important role in the development of Orthodox Judaism in America. What are your thoughts on the future of the Religious Zionist-Modern Orthodox community in the United States?**

The Religious Zionist community in the Diaspora faces a serious challenge. How do you continue to identify as a Religious Zionist when you are living in a Diaspora of choice, and all of us have the opportunity to live in Israel? It's much easier to call myself a Religious Zionist when I'm not allowed to enter Israel. This may be why the *yeshiva* community usually shrugs its shoulders at Zionism. If they focus too much on the importance of Israel, it becomes much more difficult to justify living in Lakewood, so they choose to focus their attention elsewhere. But in our Religious Zionist communities, where we constantly stress the importance of Israel and Zionism, we can't avoid this issue.

How should we grapple with this tension? On the one hand, we must

## **“How do you continue to identify as a Religious Zionist when you are living in a Diaspora of choice, and all of us have the opportunity to live in Israel?”**

acknowledge that Aliyah is not easy and that there are reasons, some valid and some not, for not living in Israel. But on the other hand, a Religious Zionist community in the Diaspora must not ignore the tension between its beliefs and reality; it *should* remain uncomfortable to willingly choose to remain in exile. We should all say: “there are reasons for me to be here in exile, but I recognize that Israel is my real home.” We have to be able to create communities that live with that tension. People have to be able to live

with that. The moment that tension is lost, G-d forbid, we lose the battle.

Diaspora Religious Zionists must also appreciate that they live in a vastly different world from Israeli Religious Zionists. All too often, we treat Israel like Disneyland. We go on the Kotel ride, the Masada ride, eat some shawarma, buy some presents at the gift shop and go home to America. But while American Jews talk about the colleges their kids are going to, Israeli parents talk about which units in the

army *their* kids are going to. I once told the shul that they must understand that a secular mother in Haifa who sends her son to the army has more of a right to determine the borders of Israel than we do! Recognizing the parameters of partnership with Israel is another Diaspora challenge.

### Why did you choose to make Aliyah when you did?

Barbara has always yearned to make Aliyah more than I did. Before my last contract, we made a deal and agreed that when the contract was completed and I was 65 years old, we would make Aliyah.

Truthfully, as we got closer to the end of the contract, I felt I wasn't yet ready to retire. I was at the top of my game, the Shul was growing and strong, and I didn't want to give it up. But my wife and children said to me, "leave while most of the people still want you to stay!"

They were very wise; I left at the right point, and I came to Israel at a stage where I could still contribute.

My good friend Rabbi Lenny Matanky said this interview should be called: "How I Went on Aliyah Because My Wife Made Me Go!"

### The Rabbinate is an all-encompassing job; there is little separation between your personal life and your profession. What have you missed since your retirement? What have you enjoyed most about your new-found freedom?

I miss being in the mix and making a difference. We were an important part of people's lives; we grew up together as families. But once I left, I was gone; I'm not the go-to guy anymore. That is something I miss. I also miss the communal involvement, the national involvement. But I have also found that there are other ways to make a mark. I am fortunate to have many opportunities to continue teaching and speaking in Israel, and I welcome the opportunity to continue to write.

### You have long been a careful student of the Chumash, as readers of "Unlocking the Torah Text," your study of the weekly *parasha*, have seen firsthand. Has your Aliyah experience, and now living in the Land of Israel, shed any light on your understanding of the Torah?

The Torah comes alive when you move to Israel. One of the key things I often think about is *yerusha*, heritage. One of the reasons G-d begins the Torah, and Jewish history itself, with the era of the forefathers and foremothers, and not with the national era, is to create the concept of legacy. When you enter the Land of Israel, you aren't entering a foreign land, but rather a land promised to someone before you. When *Klal Yisrael* left the desert and entered the Land of Israel for the first time, they were receiving a legacy from their forefathers. And so the land was much

more precious to them, like a treasured heirloom received from a beloved relative. Wherever you go in the Land of Israel, whatever site you visit, you feel that sense of legacy, that this is a land that was promised to your forefathers, a land that is deeply yours.

But it also flows the other way. In *Parashat Pinchas*, the equation used to divide the land is very complex, factoring in not only the people who entered the land but also those who left Egypt many years earlier. When you go into the land, you're not just going in; you're carrying those who came before you on your shoulders. In Israel, you recognize that you're not just there for yourself.

The efforts you make to be there are not just for you but for the millions of Jews throughout the ages that you are carrying with you. ■



Rabbi Shmuel and Barbara Goldin being greeted by family at Ben Gurion airport having made Aliyah.