

**Seven Decades of
Torah Life in the
State of Israel
1968–1977**

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CHASING A TORAH REVOLUTION: KI MITZION TETZEI TORAH

With a sense of youthful passion, the State of Israel turned twenty years old in 1968, looking to make further strides in its development as a nation among nations. As with many twenty-year-olds, her drive to make a difference and confidence in a better tomorrow led to the planting of seeds, ones whose fruit we still reap today.

...כי מציון תצא תורה ודבר ה' מירושלים
(ישעיהו ב:ג)

... *For Torah emerges from Zion, and the word of God from Jerusalem.*

In his vision of the end of days, Yeshayahu describes a time when Torah will emerge from Jerusalem, spreading forth throughout the world. On the heels of '67, and the successful miracles of the Six Day War, the decade between 1968 and 1978 showcases some of the most significant and revolutionary personalities in the Torah world, embodying the spirit of this prophecy.

While by no means exhaustive, the following *olim* represent some of this decade's influence on Torah study; their impact reverberates today.

- Born in Riga, Latvia, **Dr. Nechama Leibowitz** immigrated to Israel after studying in Germany, and changed the face of **Tanach Education** as she taught her method of study in countless institutions and through the publication of her famous *Gilyonot*. Dr. Leibowitz became a full professor at Tel Aviv University in **1968**, and received the Israel Prize for Education 12 years earlier.

- Born in Paris, France, **Rav Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein** made aliyah after studying in the United States, and in **1971** began strengthening the Dati Leumi community and Hesder Movement through his position as **Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Har Etzion and founding Rosh Kollel of the YU RIETS Israel Kollel.**

- Born in Baghdad, Iraq, **Rav Ovadia Yosef** immigrated to Jerusalem at the age of four, and “*hechezir atarah l'yoshnnah* — restored the past glory” to the Sephardic community, ultimately serving as the **Sephardic Chief Rabbi** of Tel Aviv from 1968–1973 and **Sephardic Chief Rabbi** of Israel from **1973–1983**.

- Born in Dublin, Ireland, **Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Cooperman** made aliyah after studying in Chicago, and revolutionized advanced women's learning by opening **Michlalah** in 1964. Michlalah received accreditation to grant degrees to students from the Council of Higher Education of the State of Israel in **1978**.

From Sephardim to Ashkenazim, Tanach to Gemara, Haredi to Dati Leumi, and from the “*arba kanfot ha'aretz* — four corners of the world,” these four remarkable individuals ascended to Israel and helped bring

about the Torah revolution that occurred from 1968–1978. Upon the footsteps of miracles, two of Isaiah’s prophecies were realized, as the “ingathering of the dispersed” (Isaiah 11:12) made their mark on the “Torah emanating from Zion” (Isaiah 2:3).

There is an additional Torah phenomenon that originated in this decade, one that has turned into something of an educational movement and mainstay in the Anglo-speaking Jewish community: *Shana Ba’Aretz*. What many in the Yeshiva University community now take for granted — that students spend a “gap year” (or more) learning in Israel — was not commonplace before this Torah revolution.

“We created a new world,” said Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff,¹ as he recalled the creation of BMT, Beit Midrash L’Torah, in 1969. Together with Rabbi Moshe “Whitey” Horowitz, and with inspiration from Moshe Kobrin, the first Anglo-targeted *Shana Ba’Aretz* program for young men was created, with a mission of “exporting Torah to the Anglo world.” The word of Hashem now had a new route by which to emerge from Jerusalem, influencing Anglo communities around the world as students returned home from studying there.

This contemporary idea to send teenagers to Jerusalem to study Torah has a historical basis, albeit not one of success. The Gemara (*Bava Batra* 21a) describes a time when Chazal instituted an educational system in Jerusalem to solve a crisis facing a vast number of children who did not have parents who could teach them Torah. The location was chosen, explain Tosafot,² so that the students would witness the Kohanim and their service in Jerusalem, which would inspire them to

learn better. The Gemara itself invokes the verse “*ki miTzion teitzei Torah*” to support the idea that the new national educational platform should begin in Zion. Since Jerusalem was too far away to attract children without their parents accompanying them, Chazal instituted additional “schools,” which only attracted older students because they were already far from home.³ Ultimately, Yehoshua ben Gamla, the Kohen Gadol, is credited with creating the first ever localized Jewish educational system, which saved Torah from being lost from that generation.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s a new iteration of this story occurred and is still unfolding before our eyes, as great individuals have established a successful educational system that is far away from home, for children in their later teenage years, and in or around Jerusalem. Years ago, these very criteria made creating a schooling system almost impossible, and yet today they are commonplace components to many of the successful *Shana Ba’Aretz* programs. These programs originated for young women with Machon Gold, in 1958, and for young men with BMT, in 1969, and in the decade after the Six Day War, the *Shana Ba’Aretz* Revolution began. Thousands of Anglo young men and women have come to Israel, attending one of countless *Shana Ba’Aretz* programs to learn and grow, and have benefited from “*avirah d’Eretz Yisrael*.”

In the 21st Mishna of *Pirkei Avot*, Shmuel HaKatan highlighted significant milestones throughout a lifetime, ones that can be apropos to the anniversary of Israel’s existence as well.

בן עשרים לרדוף בן שלשים לכה.

A twenty-year-old chases and a thirty-year-old has attained strength.

It is not surprising to note how many

“30-under-30” lists exist to feature those in this age range who *chase* after a better world with passion and a healthy sense of optimism that change is achievable. Perhaps Shmuel HaKatan’s quote can be developed a bit deeper, beyond recognizing common phenomena in the emerging adult population.

Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemach Duran (Rashbetz), a 15th-century Spanish halachic authority, expounds on Shmuel HaKatan’s comments in his *Magen Avot*, a commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, ad loc..

The Rashbetz explains that a child who began his learning at the age of five will have completed the content of Mikrah, Mishna, and Talmud (each over the course of five years) by the age of twenty. It is now the responsibility of this twenty-year-old to *chase* after **these achievements**, to fortify them internally. After all, what better way to prepare oneself in advance of “the strength of a thirty-year-old?”

The Torah revolution that occurred between 1968 and 1978 was the result of decisions that Jews from four corners of the earth made: to fortify the young, passionate state with an identity of Torah. They chased after the achievements of those who came before them to strengthen Eretz Yisrael, and in doing so they changed the world of Torah as well.

Endnotes

1 Thank you to Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff for allowing me to interview him about his personal reflections about this time period.

2 Tosafot, *Bava Basra* 21a, d”h “*Ki Mitzion*.”

3 See *Chiddushei Ritva*, *Bava Basra* 21a, d”h “*v’Adayen Machnisiin*.”