

# What Are They Looking for There, In the Middle of the Night?!

## *A glimpse into the world of the 'Anshei Chatzos.'*

1 a.m. A cold winter night. Relentless rain. Empty, silent streets. From surrounding fields, a jackal howls. A sudden lightning flash illuminates dozens of figures rushing through the rain toward an impressive building on the corner of Admor Mi-Vizhnitz Street and Knesset Yechezkel, whose tall windows seem to diffuse not ordinary light but some higher, blissful radiance. Suddenly, things are jumping here, as if it were a sunny midday, not well after midnight in a raging thunderstorm. This is Beitar's Kollel Chatzos, and these are the "anshei chatzos — the midnight men."

"Chatzos" is a phenomenon, and this *kollel* is one of the most moving expressions of that phenomenon. You open a beautiful door, and suddenly, you're inside. The place is like a beehive — 60 men enthusiastically serving the Creator.

In the corners of the central hall, the "avlei Tzion — the mourners of Zion" sit on the ground, bent over their *Tikkun Chatzos* booklets, keening *Tehillim* and *piyutim*. Did you think that mourning for the Destruction was a service of earlier generations? Come see how they mourn here in earnest, for the Beis hamikdash, the exile of the *Shechinah*, the sufferings of the Jewish People, exactly as prescribed in the *Shulchan Aruch*: One removes one's shoes, sits on the floor, rubs ashes on one's head, and laments.

"We mourn not only for the Destruction that was," one explains, "but also for the soul's exile into evil desires, sadness, depression, materialism. And we yearn for the Redemption — for all of us in general and for each person in particular. The true Redemption, the inner Redemption."

Around the tables, the "war of Torah" rages. Tiredness has no place within these walls. Every corner is alive. One of the men explains: "The nighttime hours, and especially *chatzos*, midnight, are the times of greatest clarity. Then the world is still; there are no disturbances. The learning is pure, untainted — more than at any other time. I wouldn't give up this delight for all the treasures in the world."

An elderly man sits beside a young newlywed. "Our age range is from 20 to 70," one of the *kollel* learners tells me. There are men who work all day, go to bed early, wake at *chatzos*, and spend the long night immersed in the sweetness of Torah. As one of them testifies, "This is the motor that keeps me going all day." Beside them sit others who learn Torah by day, as well.

Finally, we meet the *Rosh Kollel*, Rav Yehoshua Meir Deutsch. His schedule is so crowded that he hardly has time to speak with us, but we ask him a few questions:

### **Kollel Chatzos? Why a kollel at midnight?**

He smiles. "Because there's no time more elevated — or more propitious. The hours of *chatzos* are the most tremendous 'eis ratzon' of all. It's the first section in the *Shulchan Aruch*. All the holy *sefarim* praise learning during *chatzos* and describe this as our People's oldest, most established, greatest, and most certain *segulah*. Rebbe Nachman calls it as much of a *segulah* as giving a *pidyon*."

"It's an amazing time to learn. The gates of Gan Eden are open. In this world, too, there's no work, no distractions. The holy *Zohar* brings that at dawn, the Creator stretches forth His scepter of kindness; whoever has merited standing and learning during the night may stretch out his hand and touch it.

"Moreover, there's a tremendous benefit

to the Jewish People in this. Rav Chaim Falagi writes, 'He who rises at *chatzos* to engage in Torah draws near the Redemption.' The *Zohar* brings that at *chatzos*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* says to the angels, 'Let us go down and see who is learning My Torah now.' He praises such a person and says, 'What he decrees and every blessing that he utters, I fulfill,' and that if *Am Yisrael* would rise at *chatzos*, there would be no harsh decrees.

"So we are effecting benefits and salvations for the Jewish People, especially in this difficult period, in Eretz Yisrael and in the Diaspora."

### **We've met men here from several cities. Why would men who live in Jerusalem or Beit Shemesh come to Beitar every night? Doesn't this framework exist in other cities?**

"Yes, but ours is 'the father of the *kollel chatzos* network.' This first of its kind with such a large schedule, operating 24 hours a day, with air-conditioning and a room for coffee and tea.

"There's something special in the atmosphere here — the sweetness, pleasantness, brotherhood. Every Erev Rosh Chodesh, we travel to Meron. Every week, we ascend to the two places from which the *Shechinah* has never moved: the Kosel Hamaaravi and Kever Rochel Imeinu. There, during these most propitious hours, we pray for our donors throughout the world."

### **Today, there's a whole empire here. An impressive building, 60 men learning, a library, charitable organizations to help those who are learning and their families. But how did all this start? A person gets up in the morning and decides: "I'm starting a kollel"?**

"I think that this wonderful place began from strong longings. I always wanted that there should be such a group, serving Hashem together at *chatzos*. About 12 years ago, with Hashem's help, we merited organizing four or five friends to rise at *chatzos*, recite the *tikkun*, and learn together. Very quickly, others joined us. The first time I went to the United States to raise money for the *kollel*, the idea was received with certain reservations. A *kollel chatzos* sounded strange. But nowadays, I'm met with tremendous support almost everywhere I go."

### **But "tachlis," Rav Deutsch, you're supporting some 60 yungeleit here, men with families being given respectable stipends, plus special grants for the holidays. How does one carry all that?**

"First, everything here is with miraculous help from Heaven. And we have precious Jewish souls, real partners in this 'Torah factory.' One of the most sought-after arrangements is the 'Yissachar-and-Zevulun contract,' approved by the greatest *poskim*. The donor and the Torah learner sign a contract, meriting each with an equal portion in the learning. Of course, for this, I choose only the best learners, those who study constantly and never miss a night. The two become true partners; the Torah learner *davens* for his donor-partner and his family every night at *chatzos*."

"People see miracles in the merit of these contracts, in every area. I myself am sometimes astonished by the power of this *segulah*. Some have one contract for themselves and another for their business. I've witnessed a demonstrable connection between each 'Yissachar' and his 'Zevulun.' Dozens of times, I've seen how on days when Yissachar has learned with excep-



tional spiritual elevation, Zevulun reports a special success or a salvation in his family. I have many such stories.

"We have a range of other possibilities for participation, too: hourly or daily, through a standing bank order or a one-time donation, each according to his ability. Donors are mentioned by name in the nightly prayers, at the most propitious hour. We *daven* for them, conduct a *pidyon nefesh*, and pray for salvation and blessing. The '*kollel kvittel*' is another most requested *segulah*, a sort of regular subscription for donors, who constantly update the requests on the *kvittel*. They are *davened* for, and each request is mentioned slowly, with concentration, and listed on the '*kollel kvittel*' at the Kosel Hamaaravi, Kever Rochel and Meron."

One can finance some *chatzos*-learning hours of one's choice. The *kollel's* financial burden is carried mainly by ordinary people, not well-to-do at all. Rav Deutsch explains, "For example, for the merit of 36 hours of learning monthly, a donor would pay \$180; for 20 hours, he'd pay \$100."

Our conversation is interrupted by a phone call — a friend of the *kollel*, calling from Boro Park, whose little girl has a raging fever. He turns to Rav Deutsch for "first aid"; prayers in "his" *kollel*. Rav Deutsch at once records the precise name: "Rachel Raizel bas Chava, for a complete recovery." Immediately, the slip of paper is passed around the tables, each learner stopping for a moment, taking in the name, and directing his learning to the child's merit.

"I get requests like that all day," Rav Deutsch says. "The donors know this address by heart. We've seen hundreds of miracles."

One recent story: Brooklyn's Mill Basin exclusive, seafont neighborhood was in the direct path of Hurricane Sandy, predicted to be about to absorb a heavy blow. "Some of the local families are regular donors," Rav Deutsch relates. "They phoned me in a panic about the devastation that was forecast. I told them there was no reason to worry; their Yissachar-Zevulun contracts are the strongest possible insurance policy, from the Creator, Himself."

"Still, we weren't complacent here. The night before the hurricane, we held a special *tefillah*. Three days later, the emotional phone calls started. Twelve families of that neighborhood had certificates of partnership in the *kollel*; they all came out of the storm with no damage to their possessions. One of them described what took place as being like a view of the Splitting of the Sea. He was here a few nights ago and told us that the homes on either side of him had been completely flooded. "The water simply skipped over my house," he said. "There's no other explanation!"

Studying Rav Deutsch's letters is like perusing a family album containing hundreds of supporters, members of the Kollel Chatzos family from all over the world. Their lives are entwined in the *kollel* life.

They seek the merit of Torah learning for every reason imaginable — from medical issues, matchmaking, or livelihood to birthdays, weddings, etc. People "order" weeks beforehand so that a specific night can be devoted to their merit, before a crucial encounter, business deal, or surgery, or so that some venture should be blessed with success.

The building is indeed too small, but nice enough for us to ask Rav Deutsch why he built a special home for the *kollel*.

"Actually, for years, we wandered from place to place. But the holy *Zohar* brings that a home in which Torah is studied at *chatzos* — the *Shechinah* will rest upon it. I yearned to build a special building in which the *Shechinah* would dwell all day, in the merit of learning at *chatzos*. Indeed, we have merited to this. The lights are never off; every hour of the day, a group is learning and *davening*. Besides the midnight *kollel*, we also have a daytime *kollel*."

Rav Deutsch wants to build a nice *mikveh* and has many other plans.

Nighttime among the *kollel* learners seems shorter; the magical hours disappear too quickly. Before we have absorbed the experience and fully tasted its sweetness, the sky begins to lighten with the first hints of dawn. For the first time since the night started, the voice of Torah gradually recedes; the place quickly empties. The men are hurrying to the *mikveh* to purify themselves for *Shacharis*.

But aren't they tired? On the contrary, everyone seems as wide awake as could be. They seem to have drawn a special strength from each hour anew. The *davening* is longer than in most places, fervid and fiery. And when the *chazzan* bursts forth with "*Hodu*," the walls ring with a mighty thunder of renewal. The voices ascend, seeming to break through the open windows, bathing the rainy streets with wondrous sweetness.

Beitar, what a breathtaking morning. ...

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