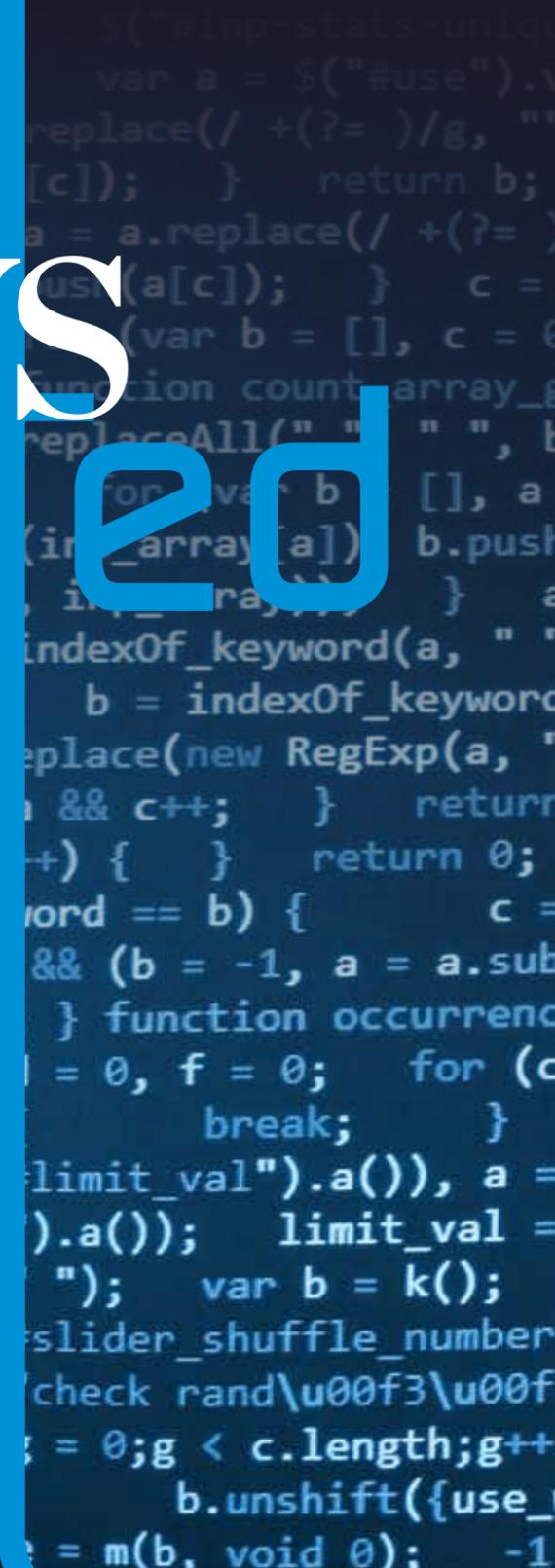




# always connected

HE'S A PRODUCT OF PONEVEZH, A PROLIFIC MAGGID SHIUR, AND THE DIRECTOR OF A LARGE NETWORK OF KOLLELIM. THEN RAV DAVID LEYBEL STARTED HEARING CRIES FOR HELP FROM A QUIET DEMOGRAPHIC IN THE CHAREIDI COMMUNITY: KOLLEL ALUMNI WHO'D GONE TO WORK AND WERE RAPIDLY LOSING THEIR CONNECTION TO TORAH LEARNING. IN RESPONSE, HE DEVELOPED A NETWORK OF SOLUTIONS THAT EMPOWER THESE MEN TO ACHIEVE BOTH FINANCIAL AND SPIRITUAL SUCCESS

BY *Yonoson Rosenblum*  
PHOTOS *Meir Haltovsky*



Rav Leybel was stunned by the gaping hole he took upon himself to fill: Former *avreichim* who'd entered the workforce weren't even sure what the *parshah* of the week was



Nearly 2,500 *bnei Torah* from all over Israel came to Jerusalem's Binyanei Ha'umah recently for the annual conference of Achvat HaTorah, a network of after-hours batei medrash for working men with a serious learning background.

They came to hear Rav Shalom Cohen, Rosh Yeshivat Porat Yosef and head of the Moetzes Chachmei HaTorah of Shas; Rav Yitzchak Ezrachi, a rosh yeshivah in Yeshivas Mir; and Rav David Leybel, the founder and moving force behind Achvat HaTorah.

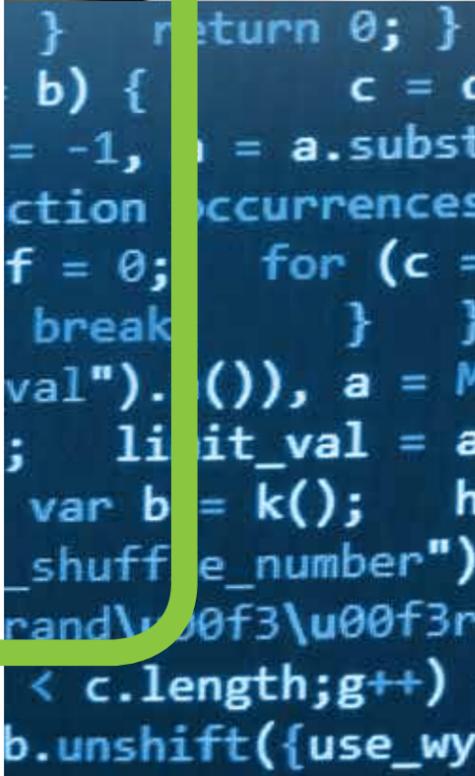
Rav Chaim Kanievsky offered *divrei brachah* by video hook-up from his home, and concluded, "May my portion be with yours."

But more than that, they came to rejoice in being part of a nationwide learning framework of more than 80 *batei medrash*, with new ones opening constantly – and to show their *hakaras hatov* to Rav Leybel for helping them once again taste the sweetness of Torah learning and feel part of the *olam haTorah*.

"Within three years of leaving kollel," one man said, "I didn't even know the week's *parshah*, until my kindergarten-aged daughter handed me her *parshah* sheet at the Leil Shabbos meal. Achvat HaTorah changed everything."

As a successful lawyer in the crowd put it: "I owe my life to Achvat HaTorah."

**Disenfranchised** The predominance of the norm of long-term Torah learning among chareidim in Israel means that the kollel experience is not specifically tailored toward preparing *avreichim* to enter the marketplace, along with the challenges that brings. A general sense that "going out to work" means distancing oneself from the community can be disorienting and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The sad result: Some of those who leave kollel to work or study for a degree may close their Gemaras, only infrequently opening them thereafter.



The man who discerned this communal downward spiral and acted to change it has an unlikely resume. Then again, Rav Dovid Leybel did not start out with a grand plan to create Achvat HaTorah. A Ponevezh alumnus and *maggid shiur* and rosh kollel since age 20, Rav Leybel has spent his entire adulthood spreading Torah. Though his father, Rabbi Moshe Yoel Leybel, was a Gerrer chassid who had learned in the famed Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin under Rav Meir Shapiro and enjoyed a close relationship with the Beis Yisrael of Gur, the elder Rav Leybel – head of the kehillah in Strasbourg – sent his son from Strasbourg to Lithuanian institutions – first the Gateshead Yeshivah and subsequently Ponevezh.

From the time he arrived in Ponevezh at the age of 16, Rav Leybel attached himself to Rav Shach. The two spoke in learning every day, and the *chiddushei Torah* the pair exchanged every *bein hazmanim* remain among Rav Leybel's most precious possessions. He credits Rav Shach with having given him an approach to learning – the dogged pursuit of *emes* only, with deference to none.

At the age of 40, Rav Leybel began opening a series of kollelim under the name Kollelei Rabi Akiva Eiger. Close to 200 *avreichim* now learn in the ten kollelim in the network. In addition, Rav Leybel serves as rosh yeshivah of Yeshivas Reb Chaim HaLevi in Bnei Brak. There he gives three *iyun shiurim* a week and one

*mussar vaad*. Except for the three days a month he travels abroad on business, he is in the beis medrash from early morning until midnight.

Rabbi Leybel's activities, while admittedly ambitious, were very mainstream. But a series of conversations with former *talmidim* who had entered the workforce added a different dimension to his initiatives. The *talmidim* described their very real dilemmas and inadequate spiritual resources. Among the most common complaints was that they no longer felt like they had a place to learn, and as a result, their connection to Gemara learning had declined greatly.

"To be a good Jew," Rav Leybel says during a conversation in his Bnei Brak



beis medrash, “requires a powerful attachment to Torah learning.” And in 2011, he set out to create a beis medrash for his former *talmidim*. As demand for the after-hours kollelim grew, Rav Leybel was stunned to discover what a gaping hole he had to fill. Before opening the second such beis medrash, he went to speak to Rav Aharon Leib Steinman *ztz”l* about the project. The latter encouraged him and kept repeating in Yiddish, “It is a great thing you are doing; it is a great thing you are doing.”

**Staying Committed** The secular press often reports on the jobless males of chareidi society. But today in Israel there are over 10,000 chareidi men pursuing academic and vocational training, and many more already working. The big problem, according to Rav Leybel, is that “no one is raising a finger to ensure that they remain connected to Torah.”

The Achvat HaTorah network is his answer to that problem. Reflecting Rav Leybel’s insistence on the power

“I have been a rosh kollel for 40 years. But where is it written that one who values kollel must denigrate and look down on those who work?”

of Gemara learning *b’iyun*, the only requirement for acceptance in one of his Achvat HaTorah batei medrash is a background in serious yeshivah learning and a commitment to learn *b’iyun*, in the style of the yeshivos. The participants do not receive a stipend, but Rav Leybel provides a salary for the rosh kollel in each branch.

In addition, a significant share of Achvat HaTorah’s large annual budget goes to sponsoring events that build a sense of belonging to a community of *lomdei Torah*. The efforts extend to members’ wives and families as well, and the annual celebration bringing together all the branches is the culmination of those efforts.

To those who claim that by providing an intense learning framework for working men he is devaluing kollel, and thereby encouraging *avreichim* to leave kollel, Rav Leybel has a brusque reply. “I have been a rosh kollel for 40 years. I don’t need anyone to lecture me about the value of kollel. But where is it written that one who

values kollel must denigrate and look down on those who work?”

**Working Solutions** Somehow running a network of ten kollelim and another network of over 80 batei medrash, besides preparing and delivering his own thrice-weekly *iyun shiurim* (hundreds can be accessed at [www.shiurey-harav.co.il](http://www.shiurey-harav.co.il)), did not deter Rav Leybel from undertaking in 2013 to create a nonprofit for training chareidim and a high-tech company to employ them.

When I asked him how he could take on so many responsibilities and at such a cost in terms of time and money, he appeared not to comprehend the question. He point-blank refuses to speak about himself, only about his projects.

I can only surmise that he inherited from his father *a”h* — founder of Yeshivat Chachmei Tzarfat in nearby Aix-les-Bains — a sense of responsibility for any challenge facing the community to which he thinks he can offer a partial solution.

Through Achvat HaTorah, Rav Leybel became a natural address for many kollel *yungeleit* looking for employment opportunities. In his conversations with *avreichim*, he detected two recurring themes: “They had no real employment opportunities. Furthermore, they felt that by entering the workforce, they were betraying their community.”

So Rav Leybel began researching the growing number of programs — many in academic degree-granting programs — preparing chareidim for the high-tech industry. And he found a crucial problem: drop-out rates were way over 50 percent. Lack of previous exposure to English has proven to be the most serious obstacle. Both the academic programs and certainly computer programming require a reading and writing knowledge of English.

About the lack of English, there was nothing he could do in the short-term. But some of the other causes of the high drop-out rate do admit of solutions. One

is the time lag between the beginning of studies and the economic return. Those who leave kollel under economic duress simply cannot afford the four or five years (including a preparatory year) of study required to acquire an academic degree. Second, many voice worries about obtaining work and the suitability of the work environment, even after attaining a degree.

Amazingly, within less than half a year of delving into the problem, Rav Leybel had formulated a response: Avratech, a 12-month course to prepare participants for careers in high-tech, followed by guaranteed employment. To make clear that the participants would not be turning their backs on Torah learning and ensure that they continue to identify as *inei Torah*, they would learn in a separate beis medrash under the supervision of a rosh kollel the entire first seder.

**Their Eyes Light Up** Rav Leybel tapped Aharon Safrai, who had previously been the director of the largest kollel in Elad, to serve as CEO of Avratech. He personally interviews each of the hundreds of candidates for the program. If the interviewee tells him that he has enough financial resources to remain in kollel for a few more years without financial pressure, Rav Leybel is likely to advise him to do so and to return in a couple of years. And if he detects someone who is uniquely talented in learning, he will encourage him to do everything possible to realize his potential for *harbatzas Torah*.

The major question hovering over Avratech at its founding was this: Can a half-day program possibly train *avreichim*, with deficient backgrounds in math and English, as computer programmers — in just 12 months?

The answer turned out to be yes. Teachers in the program report that the eyes of the *avreichim* light up in their math classes. And their Gemara training makes

them well-suited for the logic and precision necessary to be a good programmer. News of the success of the program spread rapidly by word of mouth in the chareidi community. Between 2012 and 2016, applications went up from 100 to 700 for the 30 available places. And the drop-out rate among the 30 applicants accepted every year is between 25 and 30 percent, less than half of that in comparable programs.

To provide such intense training is not cheap. Each student costs Avratech 90,000 shekels a year, including a 2,000-shekel monthly stipend (approximately equal to or even slightly above the average kollel salary). Initially, Rav Leybel carried that entire funding burden alone. But today much of the funding burden is covered by significant private donors — David Hager, Shlomo Eisenberg, and Jeffrey Swartz; as well as major foundations including Matanel, Russell Berrie, and the San Francisco Federation; and government bodies such as the Jerusalem Development Authority.

**Guaranteed Jobs** With Achvat HaTorah and Avratech under his belt, Rav Leybel wasn't done. In order to guarantee employment to all Avratech graduates, Rav Leybel next created Ravtech, a high-tech firm offering services on specific projects to larger companies.

Ravtech employs graduates of Avratech, and it guarantees them steady work. That comes with a catch. The industry practice is to hire workers as new projects are secured, and fire them as projects are completed. Ravtech cannot do that because of its guarantee of employment. Miki Segal, the current CEO, says that the requirement of a fixed workforce is equivalent to a high-tech service provider having "weights tied to your legs."

The guaranteed employment is not the only wrinkle in Ravtech's business model. Workers are expected to put in only six and a half hours a day, compared to the basic industry workday of at least nine hours. The remaining two and a half hours are spent in

# The Woman at the Top

Ravtech's first CEO certainly seemed like an interesting pick for an all-male chareidi program: a non-chareidi woman named Vered Mor. (Today, she is the president of Ravtech, in charge of business development, while Miki Segal runs the day-to-day operations as CEO.) Mor came to Ravtech from the world of philanthropic foundations and before that the Prime Minister's Office. While she had never previously worked in high-tech, she brought a wide range of connections to her job.

Like all those who work with Rav Leybel, from the roshei kollel in Kollelei Rabi Akiva Eiger and Achvat HaTorah to his business partners, Mor enjoys broad authority. That likely stems from Rav Leybel's confidence in his ability to choose the right people and the willingness to give them decision-making power, while keeping him apprised of what they are doing. For her part, Mor marvels at the depth of Rav Leybel's commitment to his vision and his willingness to invest in making it a reality. "I've never experienced anything like this before," she told me.

I asked Mor why she thinks Rav Leybel tapped a non-chareidi woman (albeit one who dresses in compliance with the rules of *tzniyus*) to head Ravtech. "I'd guess there was a bit of a gimmick involved," she says. "By hiring me, he conveyed an implicit message: If a chareidi-founded company is not afraid to hire a woman, then companies should not be afraid to hire chareidim."

It also sent a clear message that the learning side of Ravtech and the business side are completely distinct, and that Rav Leybel would always have full control of the former. If, for instance, a question arises of how to handle calls deemed "urgent" by the client during learning seder, the address is Rav Leybel.

Has being a woman ever impeded her communications with Ravtech employees? Mor smiles at the question. "The wives of most of the men working here have been until now the primary breadwinners in the family," she says, "so the men are used to discussing financial matters with women, who have a large say in how the money should be spent."



Oxygen for the soul. The dividing line, according to Rav Leybel, depends on priorities

the kollel at the beginning of the day.

While salaries are modest during the two and a half years that graduates of Avratech are committed to remain with Ravtech, they are competitive with salaries for other entry-level jobs for those without university degrees. Getting that first job on their resumes is crucial. All those who have elected to leave Ravtech at the end of two and a half years have quickly found employment in the 13,000-to-18,000-shekels-per-month range with other companies. And for those who stay within Ravtech, salaries also rise sharply.

Though Ravtech employees greatly develop their technical skills during their first two and half years on the job, the most important thing they acquire during that period is an understanding of marketplace expectations. They learn how to work as part of a team and how to communicate with those outside the chareidi world without feeling threatened.

**Untapped Resources** Good ideas need good timing, and Rav Leybel has benefited from a nationwide drive to tap chareidi talent in the high-tech field. Current estimates of the number of openings for computer programmers in the Israeli high-tech sector vary between 10,000 and 15,000. And that shortage threatens Israel's dominant position in high-tech. To solve the shortage, high-tech executives have identified chareidim

as the great untapped source of talent, and also likely one of the least expensive. Chareidim don't share the typical high-tech mentality of always looking for a new job that will pay a few thousand shekels more. And both chareidi women and, of late, men, have demonstrated that they will often trade a higher salary for an environment that is sensitive to their religious needs and for more flexible hours.

But it's not just numbers behind the new drive to welcome chareidim to high-tech. The high-tech industry has also seen the rise of a strong ethos of making a social impact.

Ravtech's founding CEO Vered Mor captures that ethos. "I wanted to be at the meeting point for people of different cultures," she says, explaining the appeal of Ravtech, "and to participate in breaking the stigmas on both sides. It's important for all to learn that contact with people outside of one's own group does not have to be at the cost of one's distinctive identity."

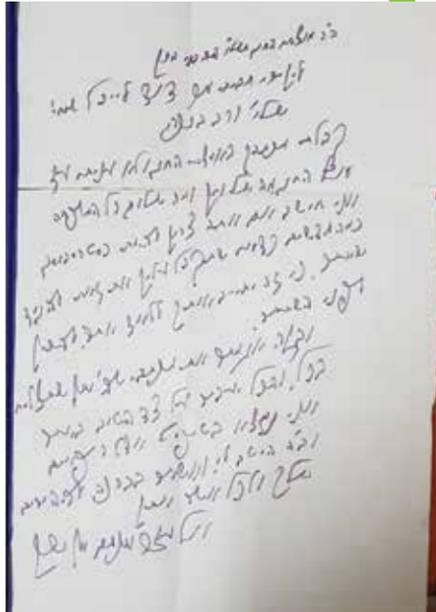
Miki Segal, Ravtech's current CEO, came to Ravtech from Amdocs, one of Israel's most successful high-tech companies, where he built in a branch in Nazareth of 300 employees from four different religious communities — Christian, Muslim, Druze, and Jewish. Still in his forties, he explains the decision to move to a small company like Ravtech along similar lines to Mor. "At a certain

point in life,” he says, “making a difference is more important than how much you earn. I decided that this is where I could make a difference.”

No one exemplifies the social ethos better than Benny Levin, the chairman of Ravtech’s board. At 35, he left the IDF as a lieutenant colonel in the famed 8200 intelligence unit to form a company with seven other IDF colleagues. That company, Nice Systems, became one Israel’s first major high-tech successes. At 50, Levin decided he had made as much money as he would ever need, and turned his energies to full-time philanthropy.

Together with a number of other successful high-tech executives, Levin formed Israel Venture Network, which utilized their pooled management expertise to build a stronger, more resilient society. He has been deeply involved in the creation of two youth villages. And for the last eight years, IVN has been developing the model of a “social business” — i.e., a business that has both an economic and social bottom line. A restaurant employing disabled persons or at-risk teenagers might be one example. Ravtech is another. On the one hand, Ravtech is subject to the discipline of the market. On the other hand, the profits will all be plowed back into Avratech — a social and spiritual engine for both the business and greater community.

When I asked Levin how he views Ravtech’s chances for economic success, he answers rapid-fire, as if making a PowerPoint presentation. Despite its guaranteed employment of all Avratech graduates, Ravtech has nearly 100 percent utilization of its workforce, he points out. Ravtech CEO Miki Segal told me that Ravtech’s employees are as good as or better than those he supervised at Amdocs. And Levin echoes that high assessment of the Ravtech talent pool, especially their “very rapid” rate of learning. Just four years in, many of the team managers and project directors are already drawn from among the program’s own graduates.



**A devoted talmid who corresponded with Rav Schach (center), Rav Leybel has now built a spiritual support system for thousands of chareidi men pursuing academic and vocational training**

Levin says that customers have generally been very pleased with Ravtech’s work to date. He should know, as he and the other venture capitalists and high-tech executives on Ravtech’s board have used their connections to help Ravtech win contracts with some of the largest international companies: Check Point, Hewlett-Packard, Dell EMC, and Citi Bank, as well as a host of Israel’s most successful high-tech companies.

And CEO Miki Segal has plans — already being implemented — to turn Ravtech from an outsourcing service provider paid on an hourly or per-project basis to a developer of its own platforms and products.

When I asked Rav Leybel to what he attributes the degree of support that both Avratech and Ravtech have received from leaders in Israeli high-tech, he answers succinctly: “They understand that chareidim will only integrate into the Israeli economy when they feel secure that their fundamental identity is not threatened. Integration will not come at the cost of chareidi identification.”

**Dividing Lines** At the Achvat HaTorah gathering, Rav Leybel summarized his vision: to build Jews who, even when they are working, are identifiable as *lomdei Torah*. Certainly, that is the case at Jerusalem’s Avratech training center. Those studying in Avratech and those working in Ravtech all look like they just walked out of a beis medrash.

Recently, I interviewed several of them at the Jerusalem Center. They ranged in ages from 22 to 49, and covered most of the sectors of the chareidi world. Three out of the four are already working in Ravtech.

They shared a sort of “pinch me, is this a dream” mindset, unable to believe their good fortune to be able to earn a living while still maintaining serious learning *sedorim* and being surrounded by others

with a familiar yeshivah and kollel background.

A 22-year-old chassidic father of two, who is still in the midst of his Avratech training program, told me that he feels that his learning, while more concentrated in terms of hours, is more intense than ever. With so much packed into a day, he is spurred to utilize every minute. A 33-year-old graduate of Ponevezh Yeshivah with seven children expressed his delight that for the first time his debts are no longer growing, and he now has a profession that will allow him to support his family while continuing to learn seriously. Yet a third former *avreich* described how until Avratech came along, his only meager source of income came from driving one of the Mirrer buses *bein hasdarim*.

Perhaps the most excited member of the group was the oldest. Not so long ago,

he had to make regular trips to collect *tzedakah* in Lakewood during the nearly eighteen months when the yeshivah in which he served as a *shoel u’meshiv* could not pay salaries. (That period of time did have its upside: He learned English well in America.)

A younger brother already working for Ravtech described his older brother to Rav Leybel as brilliant. And in this case, it turned out to be true. Now, just two years later, the older brother learns in the Avratech beis medrash until noon, and in the evenings he edits *chiddushei Torah* for publication. In between, he is fully confident that he has mastered enough computer science to return real value to clients. And on his own time, he has even created a program to predict currency fluctuations — and found an investor to fund development.

These men are perhaps the strongest

proof of Rav Leybel’s guiding principles. Rav Leybel fully accepts that *talmidei chachamim* are the elite of any Torah society. What he rejects is the characterization of anyone not learning full-time as living a life that is spiritually *bedieved*. He builds on the Chofetz Chaim’s *mashal* of Klal Yisrael as an army. The IDF invests more in each individual pilot than in any other soldiers. But as Israel found out in the 2006 Lebanon War, an army cannot win a war exclusively based on air power. An infantry and tank corps are still needed.

The dividing line in chareidi society, Rav Leybel concluded in his speech at Binyanei Ha’umah, is not between those who learn and those who work. It’s between those who conduct their lives and homes according to the standards that they imbibed in yeshivah and those who do not. ●