

NUMBER ONE PRIORITY

by Rabbi Label Lam

And he sent Yehuda ahead of him to Yosef ("lehoros") to prepare (or literally to teach) ahead of him in Goshen, and they arrived in the Goshen region. (Breishis 46:28)

"Lehoros" ahead of him: What does "lehoros" mean? Rabbi Nechemia says: "To prepare for him a house of study where he could instruct Torah and where the Tribes could study the Torah....to teach you that every place that Jacob went he was involved with Torah just as his fathers were. (Breishis Rabba)

See how much is packed into one word, "lehoros". At first glance it looks like just a nice thing to send Yehuda in advance to establish a learning center but "why not just wait till he gets there and set things up later?" Why send Yehuda ahead? That place of learning must be pretty important.

I was involved one winter with a group of Hebrew Day School students that we were hoping would choose to continue past 8th grade and on to Yeshiva High School. We went away together for Shabbos and as the sole chaperone I had to keep these energetic teenagers engaged in productive activities a whole Shabbos long. I wasn't convinced they had the patience or I had the skills for what we were about to enter. I called a veteran Shabbaton leader and asked for advice. One game/activity/workshop he suggested went like this:

I had written on each of fifty or so index cards before Shabbos single statements such as, Kosher Pizza Shop, Land of Israel, Jewish Community Center, Torah Learning, Israeli Dancing, Israel Parade, Jewish Cooking Classes, Bar Mitzvah Lessons, Yiddish-Culture, Ulpan, Holocaust-Museum etc. The deck of cards was shuffled and dealt out to the students who were divided into three groups. I had also prepared on a large piece of oak-tag an outline of a pyramid of sorts with boxes the size of the index cards. One box was on the top with a #1 written boldly within. The next row had two boxes, #2 and #3 and the third row you guessed had three boxes etc. Each group was instructed to work together as a team that has been put in charge of the survival of the Jewish People. They are asked to place the cards that rank highest as the best strategy to advance the survival of the Jewish People. They are to be ready to defend and debate with the other groups the reasons for their prioritization. I was the moderator. It was surprised to observe the process that unfolded. You'll never guess which card found its way to the top spot when the dust of debate has settled. When given that sober responsibility of advancing the cause of the Jewish Nation they all agreed that the most critical feature would have to be establishing Yeshivas. Amazing!

With the benefit of hindsight looking over the demographics of the American-Jewish landscape one can observe how many Jewish communities and individuals have been lost along the way. In certain places there were hundreds of synagogues but a generation later, a mere turn of the page, and tragically these synagogues and their members are no more.

Not wishing to diminish the importance of a Schul but it has not proven adequate by itself to promote a second or third generation of devotees. A Schul alone is a like a 10 minute lube job. People stop off for short periods of time to tune up intermittently. That's nice and valuable for spiritual maintenance. If there's a Scholarly- Rabbi then it's like a having a gas station with a sign that reads; "Mechanic on Premises". If something breaks there is someone there to help fix it. The individual seeking that help can travel a little further. When there's a Yeshiva in town then that's analogous to living in Detroit Michigan or wherever the next, newest, and current model of cars are rolling off the assembly line. There's the future!

It can be openly observed that only those communities that established Yeshivas have remained and grow today, while other places have emptied out. Jacob understood this all too well and entering exile this is his **number one priority!** Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.