

# Israeli Rabbis Seek To Learn From American Model of Jewish Community

*Pastoral Leadership Skills Are New in Jewish State*

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**MODI'IN, ISRAEL** — A group of rabbis studying public speaking, psychology and counseling in New York or London would hardly raise an eyebrow. But here in Israel, the group of 19 rabbis gathered in a seminar room and doing just this is breaking new ground.

The rabbis who have been studying these topics in Modi'in want desperately to obtain pastoral and community leadership skills that in America are considered part and parcel of spiritual leadership. But Israel's rabbinate has developed quite differently from its Diaspora counterparts, focusing more narrowly on religious needs. And these rabbis have traveled from their homes across the country for a seven-hour seminar each Monday for the past year and a half to learn an entirely new concept of what it can mean to be a rabbi.

"My goal is to be a rabbi in a community, but while my yeshiva learning gave me the dry Jewish law, it didn't give me the ability to apply it to a community, never mind to deal with trauma issues or publicly speak," said Tzvi Davidson, a 32-year-old teacher.

The contrast between rabbis in Israel and those in the Diaspora runs much deeper than the fact that, unlike in the United States, rabbis are almost exclusively Orthodox. The deeper contrast goes to the heart of what it means to enter the rabbinate altogether.

In Israel, rabbis are variously yeshiva teachers, educators, politicians, scholars, cult figures and state employees in charge of a city, neighborhood or religious site. But they are rarely employed by private synagogue communities to be the type of pastoral figures that are familiar in the Diaspora.

Moshe Shilat, a 36-year-old lecturer in religious law at a yeshiva in Sderot, said that upon receiving rabbinic ordination he could "go in to a community of 20 to 30 families and tell them the Halacha if they ask. But I wouldn't know how to deal with people more than any other person would."

Davidson and Shilat's cohort is the first in the two-year program of the Barkai Center for Practical Rabbinics, a philanthropically funded not-for-profit whose mission is "to improve the fabric of Israeli society by intensively training Israeli rabbis in all aspects of communal rabbinics so that they can lead their communities to a more meaningful connection with Judaism and act as a unifying force in Israeli society." The Center is supported by individual donors and

two American family foundations — the Harri Hoffmann Foundation in Milwaukee and another that wants to remain anonymous.

Unsurprisingly, one of the key figures behind it is an American-born rabbi. Barkai's founder, David Fine, a former communal rabbi in Milwaukee and in Overland Park, Kan., is open about wanting to import American Jewish values to Israel.