

The Rise of Torah LeTzion

Google. Facebook. TIME Magazine. FedEx. Microsoft. These companies all became household names and changed the face of their respective industries. But there is something else they share in common: They all were the brainchild of a couple of college students.

By Estie Neff

Over the years the number of college startups has increased, not only in the secular world, but in the Jewish world as well. Perhaps Hillel's adage about Torah, "Do not say, 'When I have free time I will study,' for maybe you will never have free time," has also spurred students to grab opportunities to build business ideas and chesed organizations from scratch. Certainly, the college-startup trend has made its mark on our community.

Torah LeTzion (TLZ) is one such college startup, founded in 2008 by then-Yeshiva University students Marc Merrill and Daniel Sherman. It started when the Rosh Yeshiva of Lev HaTorah approached Merrill to raise funds for a student who wanted to learn in Israel but could not afford the year's tuition. Merrill began raising money for that one student, and ended up collecting enough to help two other students in similar situations. That's when he got the idea to found TLZ and raise scholarship money for any high school student unable to afford the costs of studying for a year in Israel.

In a mere three years, the organization has noticeably increased its number of applicants, scholarships

and funds. This past year, 19 students received scholarships of an average of \$3,000 to enable them to go to yeshiva or seminary. The range of institutions where applicants choose to go has also become more varied as word of TLZ has spread across the country.

TLZ's success can be attributed to its staff's sense of conviction and passion – important criteria for students who want to build startups according to Ari Zoldan, a seasoned entrepreneur in the for-profit and not-for-profit world. Zoldan, currently the CEO of Quantum Networks, a company he started that serves the wireless market sector, believes that "the combination of the two is the secret sauce for success."

One of TLZ's applicants was in such a desperate situation that she offered to wash the dishes and floors in her seminary to help pay for her tuition, Merrill relates. Eventually TLZ stepped in and helped her make it to seminary without having to earn her keep. "She really grew a lot while in Israel, and is a wonderful bas Torah today," Merrill sums up. "My year in Israel changed my life, and I want every kid to have the same opportunity I had," he adds.

Eli Shteingart had passion and conviction as a sophomore in college when he started Yismichu, an organization that sends college students to revitalize and connect with dying Jew-

ish communities. Yet, as a college student coming to rabbis and established Jewish organizations with his plans, he says he "wasn't taken so seriously." The same dubious reaction met Elie Lowenfeld, who founded Jewish Disaster Response Corps (JDRC) as a junior at New York University. "People often have reservations about supporting a startup organization, and even more so, when the founder is young like I was," says Lowenfeld. "This made it difficult to gain support from more established organizations and funders."

TLZ has had its own share of difficulties with eliciting donations for scholarships to help cover yeshiva and seminary tuitions, which average at \$20,000 for one year. "We need everybody's help to continue to grow and run our operations," Merrill says, adding that this past year they had to turn down nearly 70 percent of their applicants due to a lack of funds. People are often reluctant to hand over significant amounts of money to such young operators.

Money shortage and other roadblocks may very well lead to a fledgling organization's termination. Zoldan points out another critical characteristic for successful startups: "the ability to accept and understand failure," which helps young entrepreneurs in times of crisis to "quickly maneuver

and be flexible, and continue on with the desired goal."

"In life, you're not always going to succeed and not everything's going to go right, and you have to learn how to bounce back from failure," says Shteingart, who learned this lesson when Yismichu became dangerously close to folding at one point.

When times are tough for TLZ, Merrill takes some cues from his days as a youth group leader in Young Israel of Jamaica Estates, NY.

Working with children gave him an extra degree of flexibility and alertness, and the Young Israel community life gave him a love for Torah, Judaism, and achdus – unity. Without these fundamentals, he would not have the groundwork or motivation to start TLZ. "Being a leader there, and ultimately an assistant youth director, I really learned leadership skills and about overcoming difficult challenges," Merrill states.

Once money comes in, allocating it

properly can also be a challenge. TLZ does a thorough background check on the applicants, speaking to their high school principals, and Israel guidance counselors. "It's not just, here's the money – go," says one TLZ scholarship recipient from Silver Spring, MD, who remembers that TLZ checked her out to decide if she was a "good investment." TLZ kept in touch with her throughout the year via several divrei Torah she had to submit and a progress report from her teachers.

"I was really, really happy," she remembers, when she found out she was a scholarship recipient. "It made something that was basically impossible for me a reality."

This scholarship recipient is just one of many. Can such an impact come from mere college students? Yes, if they actively put themselves out there. "Because you are in college people will only half listen to what you say," says Lowenfeld. "Don't spend a lot of

time talking about or planning for the change. You need to start doing it."

With its staff made up of entirely college students, TLZ capitalizes on what their age has to offer: taking risks and thinking out of the box, being innovative and relentless. Zoldan also lists these qualities as essential for a successful startup team; qualities that come naturally to young people.

"The number one reason why people don't start things when they have ideas is because of fear," reflects Merrill. "Don't be afraid." ▲

Estie Neff joined Torah LeTzion in 2010 after identifying strongly with its mission. She is currently the organization's senior editor. Estie, a graduate of Stern College for Women with a BA in Communications, has written for a number of publications and organizations. She will enter nursing school in the fall.

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