

Elyashiv Reichner

BY FAITH ALONE

THE STORY OF RABBI YEHUDA AMITAL

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Maggid Books

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Chapter One

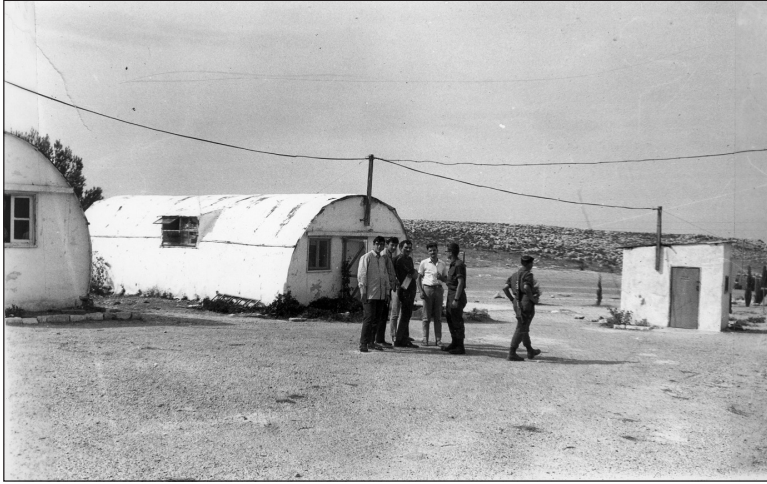
Hearing the Baby Cry

I have a request to make of you, our alumni... you, our partners in this grand dream: Don't stop dreaming. Never should your children have to ask you, "Abba, did you once know how to dream?" Continue to live with the sense of mission with which you came here. Keep on feeling connected to the yeshiva and continue on its path. Stay inspired, and God willing you'll have help from Above, too.

Rav Amital to the first graduating class, twenty years after the yeshiva's founding

Yeshivat Har Etzion officially opened on the chilly and damp evening of 3 Kislev, 5729 (November 23, 1968). Some thirty students reported to an abandoned Arab Legion barracks on Kibbutz Kfar Etzion. Rav Yehuda Amital, the head of the new yeshiva, did not make an appearance that night, nor did he take part in any activities on the inaugural day of the yeshiva that he ostensibly headed. He merely sent word to the astonished students that the following day he would deliver his first *shiur* on Tractate *Pesaḥim*.

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(photo: K. Weisz)

The yeshiva's first days. The Jordanian Legion barracks in Kfar Etzion – the yeshiva's first home .



(photo: K. Weisz)

Religious Affairs Minister Zerah Warhaftig (to the left of Rav Amital) visits the new yeshiva.

Rav Amital sent Kfar Etzion supporter Yedaya Hachohen of the Jewish Agency with the list of Talmudic sources for the students to pre-

pare for the first *shiur*. Hacoen recalls that although he undertook the task, the manner in which the Rosh Yeshiva opened the yeshiva seemed odd to him. It was only years later, after he had become intimately familiar with Rav Amital's educational philosophy, that he understood; from Rav Amital's perspective, from day one the yeshiva revolved around its students and their studies – and not around him.



(photo: K. Weiss)

*Rav Amital with his student Asher Yaron at the door to the beit midrash.
Yaron fell in battle on the second day of the Yom Kippur War*

* * *

On the day before Israel declared independence on 5 Iyar, 5708 (May 14, 1948), the four towns of Gush Etzion (the Etzion Bloc) south of Jerusalem fell to forces of the Arab Legion. They had been under siege for several months, during which time the women and children were evacuated secretly. The men stayed to defend the area and to keep open supply lines to Jerusalem. Many fell in defense of the Gush, and nearly all the survivors were massacred after they were taken prisoner by the Arab Legion. Moshe “Moshko” Moskovic had been a member of the religious Kibbutz Masu’ot Yitzhak in the Gush, and had been on a mission abroad when it fell. After the War of Independence, he and the other remaining members established the cooperative Moshav Masu’ot Yitzhak in the Lahish region of southern Israel.

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On 28 Iyar 5727 (June 7, 1967), Day Three of the Six Day War, Gush Etzion was liberated. That same day, Moshko filed proposals and plans for the reconstruction of the Gush. His primary objective was to resettle the Gush with as many Jews as possible. He wrote in his diary that a post-high-school *yeshiva gedola*, integrated within the framework of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), must be established as part of the resettlement efforts. Ten days after the war, he had already presented his plans to Knesset members from the National Religious Party. His plans called for the yeshiva to stand at the center of a community, which itself would become a regional hub.

At the same time, members of Kfar Etzion, led by Ḥanan Porat, began arranging the reconstruction of the kibbutz that they had left as children and that many of their fathers had fallen defending. On 22 Elul, 5727 (September 27, 1967), the first community in the liberated Gush Etzion – Kibbutz Kfar Etzion – was launched.

Hanan Porat, then a student at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, also advocated the idea of setting up a yeshiva in the Gush. He felt that Torah study must accompany the community-building efforts.

The third person enlisted to promote the idea was Ya'akov Drori, the National Secretary of Bnei Akiva who helped found Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, and a member of Kibbutz Sa'ad. Already at this early stage, it was clear that a Rosh Yeshiva would be needed. R. Moshe Zvi Neriya, the head of the Kfar HaRo'eh Yeshiva High School, advocated opening the new yeshiva with a nucleus of students even without a Rosh Yeshiva, but the other three believed that a Rosh Yeshiva would contribute to the stability of the conceived institution.

Ya'akov Drori was the first to mention Rav Yehuda Amital's name. Members of the Religious Kibbutz Movement were familiar with Rav Amital, who prior to the War of Independence had taught at Yeshivat HaKibbutz HaDati, then a branch of the Kletsk Yeshiva in Reḥovot.

In Shevat 5728 (February 1968), Ḥanan Porat visited Rav Amital's home for a preliminary meeting. Rav Amital spoke with his guest about the war's miracles and wonders and of God's grand scheme to return His Presence to *Tziyon*. "God did not perform all these miracles and wonders for us for nothing," he stated, "it was not so we would remain closed up in our homes." Porat recalls that these words left an opening that he

boldly exploited, asking Rav Amital how he planned to actualize these ideas. “That’s an excellent question,” the host concurred, “what’s on your mind, young man?” At that point Ḥanan proposed that Rav Amital head the new yeshiva planned for Gush Etzion. Rav Amital said that it was an excellent idea and that he would have to consider it. When he heard that the yeshiva was to open its doors that Elul, within six months of the meeting, and that an initial nucleus of students, alumni of Yeshivat Netiv Meir, had already committed to attend, he was very impressed.

In fact, Rav Amital had decided to accept the offer by the end of the meeting, even though he had not yet given a final answer. He saw this opportunity as a sort of restitution for not having been drafted to fight in the Six Day War, whose results had so inspired him. He refrained from giving a final answer until he was able to consult with his wife, Miriam. Miriam Amital also loved the idea and gave her consent. Rav and Rabbanit Amital were not interested in the conditions of his new job, nor did they ask about the sources of funding at the disposal of the yeshiva’s founders.

Several days later, Rav Amital met with Ya’akov Drori and Moshko. I discovered a completely unique personality,” Moshko recalls. “Passion for the idea under discussion had been ignited within him even before we visited. As a man of the Gush, I emphasized that the new yeshiva would be erected in memory of the Gush Etzion martyrs, and he was enchanted by the idea. We proposed a Yissakhar–Zevulun division of labor: he would engage in spreading Torah, and we would worry about finances. At that point, I realized that this man was completely grounded in reality. His questions were quite practical.” Already then, Moshko recounts, Rav Amital made it perfectly clear that he intended to take charge of determining the culture and spirit of the yeshiva. He, and not the financial administrator. And indeed, from that point forward, the yeshiva was under his courageous leadership and responsibility.

Yoel Bin-Nun, now Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, a friend of Ḥanan Porat who helped to recruit students for the new yeshiva, also first met Rav Amital at that time. Bin-Nun was a student at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, where he had been studying under R. Zvi Yehuda Kook. At that first meeting, he realized that Rav Amital was unlike any other rabbi he had

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encountered. He recalls that Rav Amital cited a passage from *Ḥagiga*: “For a yeshiva, there is none better than an old man; for war, there is none better than a young man (*bakhur*).” According to Ḥazal, Rav Amital explained, the term “*yeshiva bakhur*” is an oxymoron. A *bakhur* belongs in battle, while the elderly belong in yeshiva. What, then, is a *yeshiva bakhur*? With this, Rav Amital expressed his idea of “*Hesder le-khatchila*,” which sees the integration of Torah study with military service as an ideal. *Hesder yeshivot*, according to Rav Amital, were not designed merely to solve some technical problem; the IDF is the army of the Jews, not the Tsarist army that one would find every excuse to evade. When Ḥazal stated that “for war, there is none better than a *bakhur*,” they meant that a *bakhur* is a combat soldier. Only one who combines military service with Torah study is worthy of being called a *yeshiva bakhur*; one who does not serve in the army is not worthy of the title “*bakhur*.”

With this statement, Rav Amital articulated the abyss separating him from R. Zvi Yehuda. The latter’s attitude toward military service was complex: there were periods when he instructed his students to serve, and there were situations in which he instructed them to defer their enlistment. He did not wish to connect his yeshiva to the military, preferring to keep them completely separate.

* * *

Rav Amital was the first to articulate, more than a decade earlier, the idea of combining military service with yeshiva learning.

“We must find an arrangement (a ‘*hesder*’) with the army regarding the military service of yeshiva students,” Rav Amital said to his father-in-law, R. Zvi Yehuda Meltzer, in the late 1950s. At the time, Rav Meltzer was working to create a *yeshiva gedola* program that would serve as the continuation of his Yeshivat HaDarom High School in Rehovot. As one who served in the IDF for a year and a half, Rav Amital viewed military service as a crucial component of the Zionist yeshiva student’s world. He was concerned that “if the religious don’t serve in the army, there will be a schism in the nation.” Additionally, he contended, if military service would not be integrated into Zionist *yeshivot*, no elite Torah scholars would be cultivated within the Zionist community. *Yeshivot* without military service, he explained, would produce non-Zionist Torah

scholars, and the religious Zionist community would remain bereft of spiritual leadership. The only way to nurture Zionist Torah scholars is to make sure that yeshiva students serve in the army.

This situation is difficult to describe now that the religious Zionist community is large and strong, but during the first years of the state this community suffered from feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis both the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) and *hiloni* (Secularist) communities. Graduates of public religious high schools and the fledgling yeshiva high schools were primarily concerned with establishing religious *kibbutzim* and Naḥal agricultural settlements. The few who considered yeshiva study were considered quasi-*haredi* and suffered from a negative image within the religious Zionist community.

Rav Amital's explanation of the *hesder* idea fused ideology with practicality, a fusion that was very characteristic of Rav Amital's way of thinking; he always connected grandiose ideas to the practical world. Ephemeral ideals became grounded in reality.

The *hesder* idea posed an ideological alternative to *haredi yeshivot*. The *haredi* ideology maintained, and still maintains, that that any discipline can be studied while one is engaged in other matters, except for Torah, which must be studied continuously without distraction. Rav Amital saw this ideology as a diminution of the Torah's honor. "The occupation of Rabbi Yoḥanan the Shoemaker did not stand in the way of his greatness in Torah," he contended. He even used himself and his contemporaries as an example: people who "neglected" Torah study during the Holocaust but still became Torah giants.

Rav Amital was also the first, as far as anyone knows, to use the term "*hesder*" vis-à-vis the integration of yeshiva studies with military service. Years later, after the "*Hesder Yeshiva*" concept took root and became a brand name, he was sorry that he did not use a more meaningful name for the program. Nevertheless, the technical name given to this framework attests to the practical thinking of the man who first articulated it.

Rav Meltzer bought into his son-in-law's idea; he also ascribed great significance to military service by yeshiva students and had tried to establish, in the aftermath of the War of Independence, a military yeshiva under the auspices of the military rabbinate, in order to encourage students steeped in Torah to enlist.

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The model for Rabbis Meltzer and Amital's idea was the IDF's Naḥal Brigade, which combined military service with agricultural settlement activity. Rav Meltzer proposed to Defense Ministry officials that yeshiva students be allowed to switch the agricultural aspect of the Naḥal program with yeshiva study.

Rav Meltzer was known for his tenacity in attaining goals he had set for himself. He went from door to door in the Ministry of Defense until his program was approved. In 5719 (1959), the IDF first recognized the special track to be known from that point forward as the *Hesder* program.

* * *

Even before the proponents of the planned Gush Etzion *hesder yeshiva* turned to Rav Amital, an initial core group of students had formed.

One evening during Kislev, 5768 (December, 1967), Ḥanan Porat visited Netiv Meir, then considered the top yeshiva high school, to recruit for the new yeshiva. Most of the students knew of the young man due to his involvement in the resettlement of Kfar Etzion. At the time, some of the students were considering joining, upon graduation, a Naḥal group being assembled and strongly promoted by the religious Zionist youth movement Bnei Akiva. Others were contemplating enrolling at Yeshivat HaKotel at the recommendation of Netiv Meir's Rosh Yeshiva, R. Aryeh Bina. Still others were choosing between the various *ḥaredi yeshivot* being touted by Talmud teachers of that persuasion and Zionist *yeshivot* such as Merkaz HaRav and Kerem B'Yavneh. The prospect of being a part of a brand new yeshiva in Gush Etzion and the centerpiece of a new community initially attracted those students who were debating between joining a Naḥal group and attending a yeshiva. They saw the new yeshiva's potential to create an ideal fusion of Torah study with pioneering new settlement in recently liberated areas. The post-Six Day War patriotic atmosphere also contributed to the appeal of Ḥanan Porat's gospel.

In that first meeting with Porat, five boys decided to join the yeshiva. One of them was Yeshayahu Yeḥieli: "That very evening we began converting other friends to the idea," he recounts, "we focused our efforts on the class's most sophisticated Talmudists. We knew that if we converted them to the idea, it would prove the seriousness of the yeshiva."

The initial meeting between the students and Rav Amital, which took place at the latter's home, was attended – in addition to the Netiv Meir students – by several students from Merkaz HaRav who planned to enroll in the fledgling yeshiva in order to bolster it.

Yeḥieli's most vivid memory of the evening is of Rav Amital being moved to the point of tears by the fact that he – a Holocaust survivor – was going to establish a yeshiva in Gush Etzion. When asked by the students what would make the new yeshiva unique, Rav Amital told them a Hasidic story that ultimately became the foundational narrative of Yeshivat Har Etzion. R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi – the founder and “Alter Rebbe” of Chabad and the author of *Tanya* – and his grandson, R. Menaḥem Mendel, known as the “Tzemaḥ Tzedek” after his *magnum opus*, were studying Torah in a three room house: the Alter Rebbe in an inner room and the Tzemaḥ Tzedek in a middle room. A baby slept in its bassinet in the outer room. The baby began to cry. The Tzemaḥ Tzedek, immersed in his studies, did not hear the cry. The Alter Rebbe heard the cry from the more distant room and went to soothe the baby. On his way back to the inner room, the Alter Rebbe reprimanded his grandson: “If someone is studying Torah and fails to hear the crying of a Jewish baby, there is something very wrong with his learning.” So too, according to Rav Amital, one who is immersed in the world of Torah may not disengage from the world around him. He wished to impart this approach to his students at his very first meeting with them. Later on, he applied this outlook to himself when he entered the fray of public activism.

The boys asked Rav Amital numerous questions about the yeshiva-to-be. Many expressed concern that the yeshiva would not take root and that the Torah study there would not be sufficiently serious. They expected Rav Amital to placate them and assuage their doubts, but, to their astonishment, he refused to promise them anything. “I have no guarantees that it will succeed,” he told them, “I have articulated my credo to you. Whoever wants to come is welcome. Whoever does not is invited to withdraw.” Rav Amital even chose to use the biblical formula spoken by Jewish officers to their charges before battle (Deut. 20:8): “Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home.” Thus, already at their first meeting with Rav Amital, the students were

exposed to his honest and forthright personality and to the fact that he would speak his mind without worrying about the consequences. Yoel Bin-Nun, who was present at the meeting, was somewhat taken aback by Rav Amital's statements. "I thought that it's very risky to talk to the students like that. The rabbis at Netiv Meir were incessantly trying to convince them to go to Yeshivat HaKotel and not gamble on a new and unknown yeshiva. Instead of addressing their concerns, Rav Amital let them know that he, too, did not have all the answers. After the meeting, I stayed back with the boys to assuage those who were taken aback by the rabbi's responses and to persuade those who were still uncertain."

One of the uncertain students was Ya'akov Medan, later Rav Ya'akov Medan, one of Rav Amital's successors as Rosh Yeshiva. Ya'akov Medan was one of the most outstanding and sharpest students in that tenth graduating class of Netiv Meir. His elder brother, R. Barukh Medan, who had been Rav Amital's student at Yeshivat HaDarom, was then studying at the *haredi* Yeshivat Azata, where he was eventually appointed to the faculty. Ya'akov, encouraged by the *haredi* rabbis at Netiv Meir, was thinking about following in his brother's footsteps. Their father, Meir Medan, a Hebrew linguist and religious Zionist, was concerned that his second son would become *haredi* as well and consequently tried to convince him to enroll in the yeshiva of Rav Amital, whom he knew and held in high regard. "Rav Amital was painfully honest about the state of the Torah world," recalls R. Ya'akov Medan, "he quoted Rav Shakh as having said, 'I wish my students knew Torah after five years in yeshiva like physics students know physics after a similar period.' We were used to pronouncements that were very different. Our Rosh Yeshiva, R. Aryeh Bina, was indeed inclined toward religious Zionism, but all of our teachers were *haredi* and spoke of the Torah world as something completely pristine. For them there was a clear division between the wholly good Torah world and the suspicion-inducing secular world." According to Rav Medan, Rav Amital was the first rabbi to expose him to harsh criticism of the Torah world. He criticized the *yeshivot* that isolated themselves from the broader Jewish community; when addressing the new yeshiva, he barely offered any certainties, conveying to the students that there are no shortcuts in Torah and that they would have to work hard. "His honesty was overwhelming. His refusal

to make promises and his statement that it all depends on our individual labors made quite an impression on me.” In addition to the forthright statements about the Torah world, Ya’akov Medan was also impressed by the humanity and simplicity that Rav Amital radiated. Medan later recounted that in those days the prevalent assumption was that every rabbi is angelic and other-worldly. He could answer any question. Any incredulity or second-guessing was nothing but lack of comprehension on the part of the student. Medan was impressed with Rav Amital precisely because his bearing was not that of an angel. Medan was not looking for a mentor who would be an angel or a saint, but a human being who would understand his shortcomings and errors and his need for self-improvement. After some deliberation, Medan, too, decided to enroll in the new yeshiva. Classmate Yeshayahu Yeḥieli describes Medan’s addition to the group of prospective students of the Gush yeshiva as a dramatic achievement. “Our greatest joy during those months was to enter the classroom in the morning and tell our *rebbe* that another boy committed to the new yeshiva. When we informed him one day that Ya’akov Medan joined, too, he went into shock.”

Yeḥieli and his friends recorded another achievement on the day that Eliyahu Blumenzweig, later the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Yeruḥam, decided to join his classmates at the new yeshiva. Like Ya’akov Medan, Eliyahu Blumenzweig was one of the sharpest and most erudite students in the class. He did not attend the initial meetings with Rav Amital because he suspected that the yeshiva would become some sort of Torah-oriented Naḥal group for Bnei Akiva members, where the level of Torah study would not be serious. He was considering Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh and Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav. He joined the Gush group at a later stage, and the *ḥaredi* faculty members again let out a collective groan.

In the end, sixteen Netiv Meir students decided to enroll in the yeshiva. They were joined by three boys from the yeshiva high school in Kfar HaRo’eh, four from Or Etzion in Merkaz Shapira, several students from other yeshiva high schools, and four older students who had been studying at Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav. The future Rav Ya’akov Greenglick came to the yeshiva from Midrashiat Noam, the yeshiva high school in Pardes Ḥana. From his meeting with Rav Amital in Iyar 5768 (May 1968), he remembers only that Rav Amital instructed his son Yoel, then

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studying at the *haredi* Yeshivat Kol Torah, to close his books on Yom HaAtzma'ut, Israel's Independence Day, and go watch the military parade. The IDF parade on Yom HaAtzma'ut of that year, the first parade after the victory of the Six Day War, was especially grand. "Father said that it's a mitzva to go watch the parade," Rav Yoel recalls, "so I went with a friend and even gave notice that I'm attending because I think it's a mitzva." Yoel and his friend were the only two Kol Torah students who went to watch the procession.

* * *

That Iyar, Assistant Minister of Defense and former IDF Chief of Staff Zvi Tzur approved the "establishment of a yeshiva at Har Etzion, under an arrangement (*hesder*) similar to what is customary at Yeshivat Hesder Kerem B'Yavneh."

Due to the new *yeshiva's* location over the Green Line, which mandated security patrols, the army required Har Etzion students to undergo four months of basic training prior to beginning their studies at the yeshiva. Rav Amital saw this as an ideal situation. "After a period of time in the army," he told his students, "you will know how to appreciate every moment spent studying Torah." On 14 Tammuz, 5728 (July 10, 1968), the students gathered in Kfar Etzion for two days of preparation for the military. Rav Amital gave halakha classes and addressed common halakhic questions faced by religious soldiers. R. Yoel Bin-Nun recalls that it was in those classes that he was first exposed to Rav Amital's impressive knowledge of the responsa literature and halakhic creativity. Rav Bin-Nun recognized Rav Amital's clear, straightforward, and original outlook and halakhic courage. In contrast to R. Shlomo Goren, then the Chief Rabbi of the IDF, whose bold halakhic rulings often felt contrived, with Rav Amital everything was straightforward, not tortuous. In addition to Rav Amital's creativity, Bin-Nun was also exposed to works of responsa that he had never heard of. Soon after becoming acquainted with Rav Amital, Yoel Bin-Nun met R. Akiva HaCarmi, the rabbi of Kiryat Shmuel, near Haifa, who had studied with Rav Amital in Yeshivat Hebron. "You have no idea who Rav Amital is," Rav HaCarmi assured him, "we were roommates in Yeshivat Hebron. There was always a stack

of works of responsa next to his bed, which he would read before going to sleep like one would read a novel. He knows entire responsa by heart!”

Once Bin-Nun discovered Rav Amital’s halakhic proficiency, he began pressing him to give more classes on the responsa literature, but Rav Amital refused. His refusal stemmed from his assessment that the students were not sufficiently mature. Years later he began giving classes on this topic, but he never saw himself as a halakhic decisor or *posek*. Even though he answered many of his students’ questions over the years, he refused to publish his own responsa. His halakhic responses were always need-based, because his students required answers, and never with the goal of introducing halakhic novellae. R. Yoel Bin-Nun views this as a great opportunity wasted: “At Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav, where I was coming from, there is no place for halakhic decision making. The yeshiva has no obvious *posek*, and students had to look outside for practical guidance. I also think that had Rav Amital become established as a halakhic figure, firmly rooted in the Zionist Torah world, nurtured by the teachings of Rav Kook and Rav Hārlap, and knowing how to address philosophical matters in addition to rendering practical decisions, his subsequent political pronouncements would have been received completely differently.”

After the military preparation days, the yeshiva students were enlisted for basic training. The yeshiva administration used this brief time period to arrange the physical aspects of the yeshiva’s opening. An association affiliated with the yeshiva – the Har Etzion Yeshiva Association – was established, and Moshko began looking for a site for the yeshiva’s permanent home. It was clear to everyone that the yeshiva’s stay in Kfar Etzion would be temporary. Kibbutz members were not thrilled about hosting the yeshiva on their kibbutz, even for a short time. They were concerned solely with helping the fledgling kibbutz establish itself. Additionally, some members were worried about the effect that the strong presence of Torah-oriented yeshiva students would have on their kibbutz lifestyle. Only after some persuasion on the part of Hānan Porat was it agreed to lend the yeshiva, for one year, several structures that had been abandoned by the Jordanian Legion and that the kibbutz had designated for use as a youth hostel.

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Moshko had a definite plan. He envisioned the yeshiva as the backbone of a regional community center. To that end, he set his sights on the hill with the lone oak tree, visible from Jerusalem. During the nineteen years of Jordanian occupation, the surviving women and children of Kfar Etzion had taken an annual pilgrimage to the border, and, gazing from afar at the hill with the oak tree, had sworn to return. In the summer of 1968, Moshko submitted a request to erect a regional center on that Gush Etzion hill. On September 1, the government decided that an interministerial committee would examine the possibility of establishing the center and submit its recommendation for government approval.

At the same time, Moshko was raising funds that would allow the yeshiva to commence operations once the boys returned from the army. At one point, they received an offer of a large donation from an American Jew, but on condition that the yeshiva be located in Jerusalem and not beyond the Green Line. Rav Amital and Moshko refused the contribution; their goal was not simply to build another yeshiva, but to build it in Gush Etzion.