



by Chavah Jacobs

Most legends develop slowly; very few blossom overnight. Yet Tomer Devorah, a Jerusalem seminary now entering its second year, has consistently defied standard expectations. In one short year, the two founding deans have created something that's far more than a school: Tomer Devorah is a warm and welcoming home, a paragon of academic excellence, a hub of friendship and camaraderie, and, at a closer look, the product of exquisitely detailed, painstaking planning and research. How did two young rabbis without any significant administrative experience engender such a successful endeavor? **Mishpacha** met with Rabbis Noam Fix and Moshe Rosenstein, to hear firsthand about the unique challenges and rewards they encountered during their effort to build Tomer Devorah.

"The amount of *siyata d'Shmaya* we received is beyond words," Rabbi Noam Fix acknowledges. "There were so many variables — so many we couldn't have even dreamed of — every step of the way. Hashem helped us through every single one." In a comprehensive discussion with **Mishpacha**, the founders pointed to several other factors that played a pivotal role in the seminary's success.

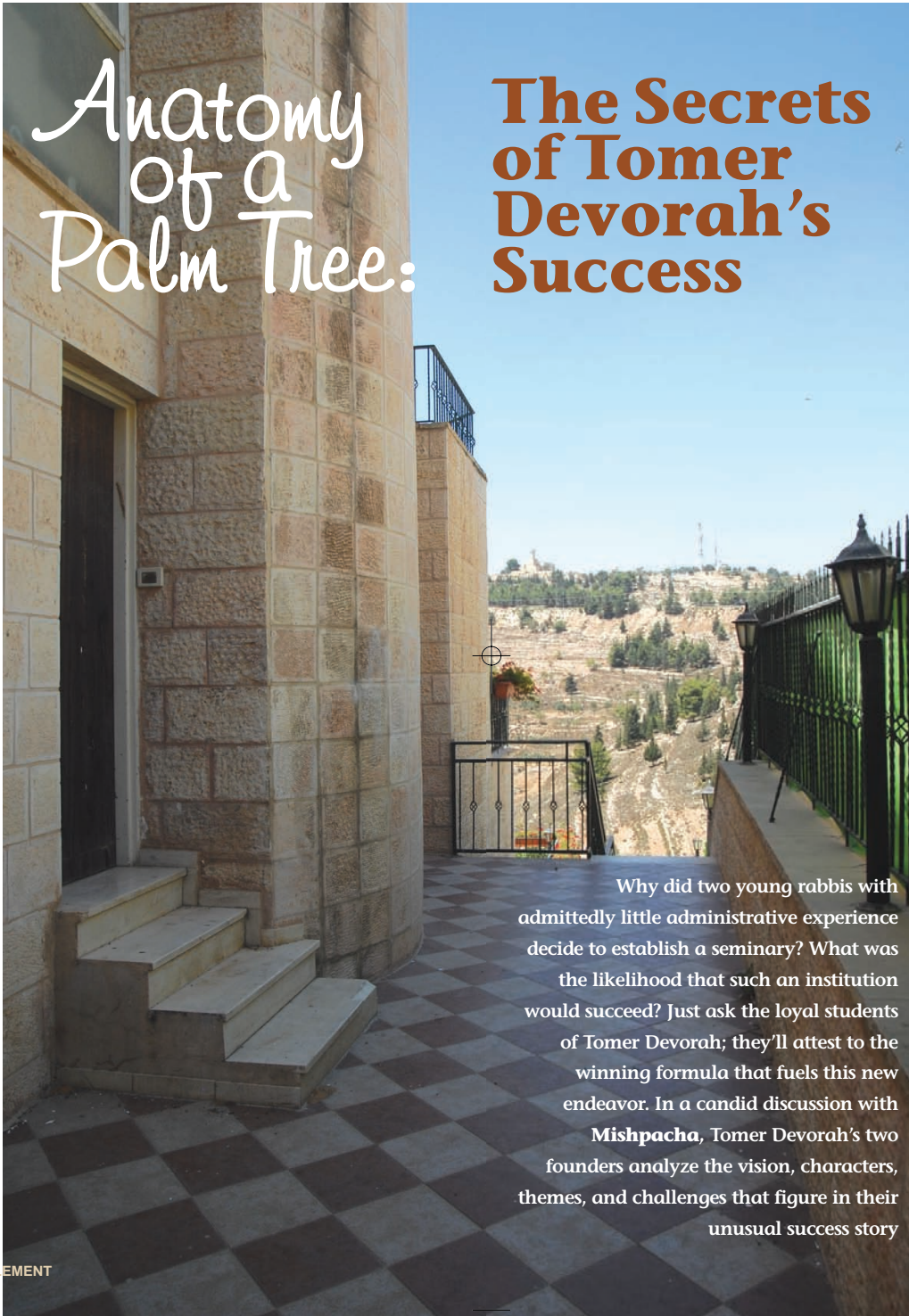
Though as recently as three years ago, neither Rabbi Fix nor Rabbi Rosenstein had had prior involvement in the seminary world, both had experienced considerable success in the world of Torah learning and *chinuch*. After becoming close friends and *chavrusos* in Yeshivas Ohr HaChaim in Queens over a decade ago, the two friends parted ways. Rabbi Fix eventually settled in Ramat Beit Shemesh, learning under Rav Elimelech Kornfeld in the Gra Kollel, while also initiating and running a program for at-risk teens. Rabbi Rosenstein and his family remained in America; he learned for several years in the Chicago Community Kollel, under Rav Dovid Zucker and Rav Moshe Francis. And then the idea formed to open a seminary together.

Rabbi Fix remembers a phone call he made to Rabbi Rosenstein years ago. "My wife and I would often have seminary girls over for Shabbos meals and the like. We felt that we would be capable of creating a program that would be a perfect fit for what these girls needed. A specific vision of a *new* seminary that would be tailor-made for today's specific tests and challenges that girls are facing. I called Rabbi Rosenstein to bounce the idea off of him, but it just was not the right time for it in our lives. The idea went on hold."

Then, "Years later," recalls Rabbi Rosenstein, "I had been thoroughly enjoying teaching *bein hasdarim* at Hanna Sacks [a girls' high school in Chicago] when a parent of one of the students raised what at the time seemed to me to be a very far-out concept: the idea of opening a seminary. A light went on in my head, and I remembered that phone call from years before. The first call I made about this when I got home was to Rabbi Fix in Israel."

That is more or less when the work started and it has not stopped since.

Throughout their efforts to build a seminary, the deans were inspired by the model and words of encouragement of their *rosh*



Anatomy of a Palm Tree:

The Secrets of Tomer Devorah's Success

Why did two young rabbis with admittedly little administrative experience decide to establish a seminary? What was the likelihood that such an institution would succeed? Just ask the loyal students of Tomer Devorah; they'll attest to the winning formula that fuels this new endeavor. In a candid discussion with **Mishpacha**, Tomer Devorah's two founders analyze the vision, characters, themes, and challenges that figure in their unusual success story



yeshiva of years before, Rav Daniel Lander, who was also relatively young when he opened Yeshivas Ohr HaChaim.

But before jumping in headfirst, "There were two questions that had to be addressed," explains Rabbi Rosenstein. "One, is there a need — or even room — for yet another seminary in Israel? And if there is, should we be the ones to open it?"

The answer to those questions came in the form of significant encouragement from many parents and *mechanchim*, who highlighted that there was a specific demographic within the Orthodox world that wasn't finding "the right place" in the existing panoply of seminaries. Tomer Devorah was custom-crafted to fill that need. In addition, reminisces Rabbi Fix, "We invested a tremendous amount of legwork, speaking with principals and guidance counselors in schools and community organizations in America, as well as with *gedolei Yisroel*, rabbis, and educators in Israel, about our idea, to see if there was a need. We must have filled a need, because, with *siyata d'Shmaya*, we were absolutely filled to capacity when we opened our doors in September [2006/5766]."

It's clear that Tomer Devorah did indeed fill a gaping hole; the result of all the painstaking and detailed planning of the school is the students' feeling that Tomer Devorah was created especially for them. Rabbi Fix breaks into a broad grin as he says, "There is no greater affirmation of the realization of our dream as when a student — or one student after another! — comes into my office and says that she feels as if the school was made just for her. This is exactly what we set out to do: To take the demographic that we were looking to serve and to, quite literally, create a school around the needs and potential there."

Further testament to the seminary's success is the fact that out of the forty girls who attended Tomer Devorah's inaugural year, fourteen are returning for the *shannah bet* program there. Rabbi Fix explains, "That means that well over a third of our girls are coming back for a second year. I find this unbelievable. The ongoing trust and faith that the girls and their parents have in this institution is truly inspiring."

As part of their vision, the deans of Tomer Devorah wanted the seminary to be like a second home. And in order to foster that sense of home, they invested tremendous effort in the planning of a suitable facility. A quick glance at the school confirms that the entire campus has been designed to maximize staff and student interaction, both in terms of time and space.

Rabbi Fix elaborates this point. "One doesn't necessarily put interior design on a list of essential skills for a *mechanech*.



But every inch of the building was thought about and discussed.” During the five months of renovations that were done before the school’s opening, Rabbi Fix and Rabbi Rosenstein spent every day planning and overseeing the work themselves. “Things like having all the classrooms and offices opening into a central area — the area where the students are making their coffee, using the computers, and relaxing between classes — it just makes a big difference to the overall feeling one has throughout the day. There is so much interaction. And all because of the layout of a floor. *Chinuch* considerations are — literally — in every corner of this building.”

As *mechaneches* Sarah Kesler explains: “The student lounge is in the center of the main floor, next to the main office, classrooms, and deans’ offices. The deans wanted to be always easily accessible to the girls.”

The lounge itself is attractive and comfortable: cozy brown sofas; a large aquarium; a small coffee corner complete with hot and cold water cooler; and a large coffee table in the center of the room. It looks and feels like the living room of a home, albeit on a larger scale.

Touring the building and the dorm areas with the deans, one can see the amount of thought that has gone into every aspect of the campus: kitchen facilities on the dorm floors, thick American mattresses on the beds, beautiful balconies overlooking the hills, even the shades of paint in the halls and rooms — every detail within this all-encompassing building bespeaks tremendous forethought. Rabbi Rosenstein explains: “We tried to think about every aspect of what makes a person feel comfortable and at home. We realized that, nowadays, girls are just not used to living without air conditioning. What was a real luxury when we were in yeshiva is now something that can be difficult to live without. So over the summer, we installed air conditioning in the dorms. There’s such a fine line between ‘spoiling’ the girls — something antithetical to the lessons and message we are looking to impart — and providing them with what they perceive as necessary in order to be able to learn and grow without *gashmiyudig* impediments.”

As in most homes, there are two hot meals, lunch and dinner. There is a laundry room, vending machines for soda and snacks, and refrigerators for girls to store whatever food they buy for themselves. The four computer stations (with filtered Internet access), the fully equipped exercise room, the piano room, and everything else in the building makes the seminary completely self-contained. Even on Shabbos and Yom Tov, the school is always open.

The deans and staff have developed a unique approach in their relationship with the students; a finely tuned balance between trust and structure. Rabbi Fix explains: “We feel it is very important to treat the girls like adults, and our expectations are commensurate with that. Our message is: ‘We’ll treat you like an adult, and we expect you to behave like one.’”

While respect is a keyword, limits are a very important part of the seminary framework. For exam-

GOING UP THE LADDER: Striking a Balance

We have just sent our daughter back to you today. I wanted you to know how much she has developed in the short time she has been with you. We enjoyed having our daughter back for Pesach. We have discovered a growing young woman who is committed to our traditional Jewish values, who displays exemplary *middos*, but hasn’t lost the bubbly personality we love.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah parent)



MY OTHER FAMILY: The Art of Atmosphere

When we visited Tomer Devorah, we were immediately struck by the warm, friendly, and caring atmosphere. Our daughter has made many good friends that she will stay in contact with once she returns to England.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah parent)

TAILOR-MADE FOR ME: The Roots of the Tomer

My daughter has just sent me a copy of her project about her chosen mitzvah. To be honest, I am overwhelmed! ... It is certainly the finest piece of work that I have ever seen my daughter produce. She has taken pride in this work, has researched it, worried about it, and she felt a real sense of achievement upon completing it.

My wife and I believe that all of this is a result of the education, care, and devotion of you, the deans, and your talented staff at Tomer Devorah.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah parent)

ple, students are expected to be present in the dormitory every night of the year. Likewise, the administration has countered the potential “free-for-all” situation presented by a long, unstructured Succos vacation, with a well-balanced schedule of special classes and trips conducted in a structured atmosphere.

Both rabbis agree that by far the most difficult aspect of their jobs is the necessity to respond to any breaking of the trust that the school is built upon. “Nobody opens a school in order to be a disciplinarian and enforce the rules,” says Rabbi Rosenstein.

“But without clear parameters, and consequences for the undermining of those parameters, we would be doing a tremendous disservice. Not only to the school as a whole and to the students who have come here because they want that structure, but to the individual who tested the limits as well.”

If someone violates this trust, it seriously ruins the school atmosphere. “I think that in such cases, other girls get more upset than the administration,” concedes Rabbi Fix.

Teaching responsibility and accountability is not limited to lessons in a classroom. In Tomer Devorah, it is the way of life in the school.

Respect for the students goes beyond behavioral expectations; it extends to an abiding value for the unique persona and character of each student. Individuality is very important at Tomer Devorah.



Rabbi Rosenstein comments, “There is a strong focus on being real. We want the girls to be true to themselves, and not come out of here just *doing* things differently. The biggest compliment we can receive is that one of our students has become more dedicated to Torah, but hasn’t lost her personality.”

“For many parents, there is a great fear of what has become commonly referred to as ‘flipping out,’ meaning that their child might return home from Israel as a totally different person. That is not what we are about. We feel that a girl’s time in seminary is the *start* of her life, not the end of it. We’re not trying to create a finished product. Rather we want to help the girls get on a certain trajectory in their *avodas Hashem*. We want them to make *kinyanim* here that will take them through the rest of their lives.”

However much time has been devoted to all other aspects of the creation and running of Tomer Devorah, learning remains the true focus. “Let’s not forget about what is the *ikar* and what is the *tafel* here,” says Rabbi Fix. “Atmosphere is important, but our focus has always been the Torah learning that takes place in our classrooms and *beis medrash*.” The curriculum consists of a carefully thought out balance between textual and abstract learning, skill building and delving, and gaining a broad knowledge base and a penetrating understanding of the topics. Similarly, in addition to the standard “frontal” classroom learning, there are a full six periods a week of individualized learning in the Tomer Devorah *beis medrash*.

Mrs. Aviva Feiner, a teacher and *mechaneches*, explains: “If you would walk into our *beis medrash* program, which the girls have three mornings a week for an hour in order to prepare for their Chumash class, you would be walking into a serious *beis medrash*. The girls are focused, intense, and studying diligently; they want to be learning, want to be growing.

High-Tech Communication

I check the blog site twice a week; I find it well done, interesting, and informative. This is our third child learning in Israel for a year, and I found the communication between the school and the parents to be outstanding.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah parent)

As a seminary that was created based on its understanding of today’s students’ background and mindset, Tomer Devorah is at the forefront of utilizing the power of modern technology. There is a school website, offering information and news about the seminary. There is a Tomer Devorah blog, frequently updated with pictures (mostly taken by the students themselves) and posts so that parents can feel involved in the girls’ lives, even if they are on the other side of the globe. Rabbi Rosenstein explains the power — and convenience — of the blog: “Once, we posted a link to a video of an actual Chumash class that had been conducted in the seminary. This provided an unmatched opportunity for our students’ parents and for future students to get a feel for the learning. There was also a time last year when a parent emailed us asking how we were going to deal with a specific potential safety issue that arose in Yerushalayim. He asked if we could post on the blog what we were doing about it. Following his advice, we posted not only what our policy and procedure were going to be for those days, but also photos of the events and speakers we brought to the school at that time. The parents really feel they are part of what is going on here.”

Additionally, the school offers private (password protected) online discussion boards at certain times of the year. Before the school year starts, the incoming students are able to meet and communicate with each other online, giving the girls a head start socially on the upcoming year. Also, during the recruiting period, potential students are given the opportunity to meet the current students, and ask whatever questions they might have about the school. The rabbis are confident that the answers will be good — they know they have happy girls.



Rabbi Moshe Rosenstein



Rabbi Noam Fix

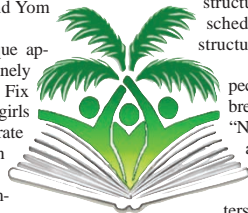
Dear Rabbi Fix and Rabbi Rosenstein,

Rabbis, I really don't know where I would be without you. You opened a seminary tailor-made for me. You gave me ample room to grow, but without pushing me, or forcing me to take on things — just with gentle encouragement. I really feel that everything I've taken on this year, and all the Torah I learned this year, is mine! It wasn't forced on me by school rules, and I don't feel stifled by the things I do.

Whatever I said in my interview, I didn't really know why I was coming to Israel. I told you that I wanted to grow, but really, I just wanted to go because that's what everyone does, and I didn't want to start college yet. I didn't realize that I would be coming to a place that would change me from the inside out. My outlook on life and my priorities have changed.

Thank you both for helping me make decisions I never thought I'd be able to make, with a strength that came from Torah; the Torah you so clearly, lovingly showed me. I am forever indebted to you.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah student)



“In addition to the warm, caring, familial feeling here, we have a very serious academic environment, with a strong emphasis on personal growth. Tomer Devorah is perfect for the girl who is looking to grow in a challenging academic environment. Not only will she refine her learning skills, but she is also going to be encouraged to delve into the breadth and depth of Torah more than she ever has before. The girls here are having a great time, but they are also being pushed in their learning in a very intensive way.”

Still, an intensive curriculum is only as good as the staff members who teach it. As Rabbi Fix puts it: “If I had to, in a word, tell you who built Tomer Devorah and made it the success that it is, I would say, ‘the staff.’ No question about it.”

Rabbi Rosenstein recounts: “When we were hiring staff, we interviewed dozens of people. We had some very specific criteria in mind. We knew we were getting many excellent, straight ‘A’ students. We wanted teachers of a caliber that would be able to challenge every student in the school. Throughout the year, many visitors sit in on our classes. Parents, high school principals, and guidance counselors have all been thoroughly impressed with the caliber and clarity of teaching and learning they were observing.”

There’s another vital component to the success of Tomer Devorah’s teachers: their genuine concern for the students. “We wanted teachers who were going to be really focused on the girls, people who



were willing to commit their *kochos* to Tomer Devorah. We wanted the staff to feel invested in the girls,” explains Rabbi Fix. “The learning experience is entirely different when a student feels that the teacher really cares about her.”

Indeed, numerous faculty members choose to attend extracurricular school functions, a visible demonstration of their concern for the students. The staff is very generous with their time and energy, and often does small things which add up to make big impressions — baking cookies for a school Shabbos night *oneg*, hosting dinner for small groups of students on a weeknight, making time to have a private *chavrusa* with a student, outside of regular class hours, going that extra mile.

The relationship goes both ways, and the students feel a unique link with these teachers who are willing to extend themselves so far on their behalf. Virtually every student finds a staff member who resonates with her, and with whom she is able to form a personal *kesher*.

Mrs. Aviva Feiner observes: “Something very special about Tomer Devorah is that there is such a feeling of closeness in the school. Each girl truly feels as if the other girls are her extended family. One after another, the girls have come up to me and told me that there was no one in the school who was not their friend. I think this is due to the school’s smaller size,

the many activities, and the tremendously high staff-to-student ratio. No one is getting lost in the shuffle.”

Happiness is a high priority at Tomer Devorah. The *eim bayit*, Mrs. Temima Marcus, lives in an apartment on campus. Asked what stands out the most for her at Tomer Devorah, she answers, “The atmosphere of the school is amazing. If someone were to walk into the classrooms, the dorms, or the dining room, they would see that the girls are happy; there is a lot of *simchas hachaim* in the school. The girls know that the staff cares about them, and they love spending time in the afternoons and on Shabbos with their teachers.”

The date palm tree, called a *tomer* in Hebrew, is famous for the sweetness of its fruit, for its abundant shade (providing shelter and comfort), and for its graceful, upright form. The date palm also offers a study in contrasts: branches on the very top, reaching up to the sky, but roots deep inside the earth, enabling survival in the harshest of climates. Finally, the date palm is an evergreen, and continually produces fruit throughout the year. Many of these are the qualities which a *bas Yisrael* strives to attain.

The *menahel ruchani*, Rabbi Yosef Brown, nicely sums up the essence of the seminary: “Tomer Devorah is like its name, a sweet environment in which to develop. There is a lot of guidance, individual care, and challenges for whoever is ready to grow.” ■

ACQUIRING MY OWN TORAH: FOCUS ON LEARNING

I don’t think I could ever thank you for everything, because everyone at the school went out of their way, and did more than I would’ve ever dreamed of. We had the best teachers. I would think Mrs. “X” is my favorite or most inspiring teacher, but then I would go to a different teacher’s house and think the same thing. Our teachers were not just amazing at teaching, but what they taught us was how they are actually living their lives. They were all role models for me. When I went to their houses for Shabbos, I saw families that I wanted to be like.

(Excerpt from a letter from a Tomer Devorah student)

