

Rav Mendel Weinbach zt"l

Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Ohr Somayach

By Dovid Hoffman

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On Tuesday, thousands of Yeshiva Ohr Somayach alumni felt that they had lost a father when they heard the news of the passing of Rav Mendel Weinbach zt"l, founder and rosh yeshiva of Ohr Somayach.

Rav Mendel invested his brilliant mind and feeling heart to draw thousands of Jews back to the joy of Torah learning and practice. As he put it, he wanted to give people a chance to have a chance. Thanks to him, many streets in Eretz Yisroel and worldwide are filled with families who seem indistinguishable from other bnei Torah families anywhere else. Only people who get to know them better realize that these thousands of individuals are the products of Rav Mendel's hashkafah that to be mekarev a Jew means to transform him into a full-fledged ben Torah.

EARLY RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS OTHERS

Rav Mendel was born in Poland in 1933. Not long afterwards, his parents moved to the United States, where his father steadfastly clung to Torah and mitzvos, refusing to work on Shabbos even if this meant working hard at less generous paying jobs to the extent that he was often absent from home when other fathers had already returned from work. His mother made up for this, infusing her young son with a love of Torah and a yearning to delve into its infinite wisdom.

While still in public school, Rav Mendel already showed a propensity to care for the welfare of others and not lock himself into his own four *amos*. On one occasion, when he came across two roughneck classmates embroiled in a violent playground brawl, he risked life and limb to chisel the two warriors apart.

In later years, he fulfilled his mother's dream of devoting himself to Torah and studied at Yeshiva Torah Vodaas in New York. There, prominent author Rav Nisson Wolpin told the Yated, he was always the most brilliant *talmid* in *shiur* despite preserving a keen awareness of what was going on in the world at large.

In 1953, Rav Mendel got his first taste of the new fight to win back the souls of *Klal Yisroel* when Rav Simcha Wasserman zt"l took him and nine other Torah Vodaas *bochurim* to Los Angeles to found a bais medrash there. Rav Simcha's idea was that the sight and sounds of a genuine bais medrash in the midst of Los Angeles' Jewish families would inspire local high school boys to go in the *bnei Torah's* footsteps. Rav Wolpin remembers that during this time, Rav Wasserman noted even then, Rav Mendel had a propensity for originality and doing things his own way, an ability that later inspired him to forge a new paradigm of Torah education. At a later stage, Rav Mendel studied in Bais Medrash Elyon in Monsey.

Rav Mendel's *aishes chayil* was Rebbetzin Sheindel Lamm, a Belgian war orphan. She had arrived in New York at the age of 5 after her parents were sent to Auschwitz and she was raised by an uncle and aunt. In 1966, Rav Mendel and his wife moved to Eretz Yisroel, where they settled in Kiryat Mattersdorf in the very first building of Rechov Ponim Meiros that has always been home to illustrious Torah homes, including that of Rav Chaim Pinchos Scheinberg zt"l. There they raised their 12 children, who sometimes felt like they were sharing their father with the hundreds of their other "siblings" at Ohr Somayach. The Weinbach home was renowned for its chessed. The rebbetzin heads a number of gemach funds, most famous of all the Yad LeYad organization

A NEW PARADIGM

During his early years in Eretz Yisroel, Rav Mendel studied in a local bais medrash together with a number of avreichim who later became prominent in the Torah world. He could have followed their footsteps, but a new historical trend dictated otherwise. After centuries of spiritual hemorrhage, the children of the Jewish people were coming back. The '60s and '70s were a time of foment, as millions of youngsters, some of them sinking into broken pits of drugs and immorality, searched for meaning.

In 1970, Rav Mendel, together with Rav Noach Weinberg, Rav Nota Schiller and Rav Yaakov Rosenberg, founded Yeshiva Shema Yisroel in Yerushalayim to attract intelligent Jews with little or no Jewish knowledge. This was one of the very first baalei teshuvah yeshivos, as they came to be known.

The idea of founding a yeshiva developed, after the four talmidei chachomim had begun organizing learning hours with students in local universities. For teaching staff, they borrowed English-speaking bochurim from various yeshivos, such as Mir and Chevron, asking them to donate an hour here and there to teach Torah to students who barely read Hebrew. The

foursome soon realized that things couldn't continue like this. More and more backpacking youngsters were coming to Eretz Yisroel. Despite increasing assimilation, there was obviously a deep thirst for learning. As Rav Weinbach put it, Jewish youngsters were now so far from the source that they had lost their antagonism. They had no objections to trying a taste of Torah and coming back.

“We began with a small number of talmidim,” he recently recalled. “You could count them on one hand. Boruch Hashem, we eventually found a place in the Novardok Yeshiva. Meals were donated to us by Yeshivas Bais Hatalmud thanks to the generosity of Rav Dov Schwartzman, who later became the rosh yeshiva of the roshei yeshivos of Ohr Somayach and gave an advanced shiur here. He testified that this shiur was at the same level as that of any regular yeshiva.”

Rav Weinberg went on to found Yeshiva Aish Hatorah in the Old City of Yerushalayim, leaving Rav Mendel and Rav Nota Schiller to run the yeshiva together for the next forty years. Ultimately, they renamed the yeshiva Ohr Somayach in memory of Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk.

Rav Mendel explained recently that the name of the new institution was chosen for a number of reasons. First, he said, it helped neutralize the fear that a neophyte to religion might naturally feel when peering from the outside and seeing the yoke of mitzvos of Torah observance. For such people, it was necessary to emphasize that Torah provides light and joy. Indeed, at Rav Mendel's 75th birthday, Rav Nota Schiller pointed out that the very word semeichim includes all the letters of Rav Mendel's name: Mendel ben Yechezkel Shraga.

Also, Rav Weinbach said, it was fitting to establish a living remembrance to Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, whose only daughter died without leaving any descendants. Naming the yeshiva after such a famous gaon also hinted at its goal of raising its talmidim to the level of genuine talmidei chachomim.

In 1974, the heads of Ohr Somayach realized that Israelis were in no less need of kiruv than their overseas counterparts, so they founded a special branch of the yeshiva for Israelis. In a way, influencing Israelis was even easier.

As Rav Weinbach recalled: “At one stage, we defined the difference between Americans and Israelis as follows: An American first needs to be shown that he is a Jew, while for an Israeli all you need to show is that you have the answer for what he is looking for.

“Many Israelis came here after a stint overseas - there in America they found their Judaism,” he said. “In general, it was much easier to persuade them to come there than over here. More than once we came across cases of an American and an Israeli meeting in India and finding themselves together once again in Ohr Somayach.”

More recently, Ohr Somayach opened branches worldwide in Monsey, Toronto, South Africa and England to supply a local kiruv solution for seeking Jews in those places and a learning center for students of Ohr Somayach programs returning home. Later still, Ohr Somayach founded a complete chinuch organization in Odessa, which also teaches younger children starting from kindergarten all the way to high school. Twice yearly, Ohr Somayach has special learning programs in the United States during university breaks, which attract a number of new talmidim to come study Torah in Eretz Yisroel.

TO PRODUCE TRUE BNEI TORAH

The goal of Ohr Somayach was always to turn non-religious youngsters into true bnei Torah. As Rav Yitzchok Hutner zt”l told Rav Nota Schiller in the early days, “If, after a number of years, it is still noticeable that they are baalei teshuvah, it means you have failed. If they enter the Torah world and become an integral part of it, you will have succeeded.”

“From the beginning,” Rav Mendel said, “we emphasized that we would not be satisfied with average results. This is the tradition we received from our rabbeim... From the first years, we demanded that a talmid should right away enter a Gemara shiur. We knew this was the only way to give him a generous dose of emunas chachomim.”

He recalled how, on one occasion, an Education Ministry official inspecting the yeshiva couldn’t grasp how it was possible for a bochur from the academic world to jump straight into the *sevaros* of the Gemara that often appear unfamiliar to a Western mind.

“But I’ll tell you the truth,” the official admitted. “I don’t know how you do this, but I don’t want to try to proffer you advice. If you have created an empire like this, you must certainly know the answer yourselves.”

In fulfillment of his ideal to aim for greatness, Rav Mendel used to point at a framed letter hanging on the wall in his office. It reads as follows: “I write with joy and gratitude to my teachers and rabbis of your institution, Yeshivas Ohr Somayach, and thank Hashem for all His kindness in enabling

me to complete Tanach, Shas Bavli and Yerushalmi, the six sedorim of the Mishnah, the Mechiltah, the Sifra, the Sifri, the Sifri Zuta, and all the various Baraisos from the year I entered your holy yeshiva in 1972 until Erev Shavuos 1994. May Hashem give you success. With many thanks. One of the talmidim.”

Rav Nota Schiller told the Yated that a large part of Ohr Somayach’s success is thanks to Rav Mendel’s insight into other people’s talents. Thanks to his multi-faceted personality, Rav Mendel related to each person according to his strengths. His talmidim include lamdonim, poskim, rabbonim and marbitzei Torah, in addition to baalei batim who are pillars of their communities.

So much time has passed since Ohr Somayach first opened its doors that Rav Weinbach recently pointed out that the invitations he receives are no longer only for the weddings of the yeshiva’s talmidim, but even for weddings of their grandchildren.

Besides teaching and learning, Rav Mendel was also a prolific writer. People working with him were amazed by his speed of output. If necessary, he could produce a deep shiur replete with Rishonim and Acharonim within minutes, and as he sat writing seforim, the words flowed rapidly from his pen in an unending stream. This month saw the end of a years-long project - the *Essential Malbim* on Chumash. In addition, he wrote seforim about Eretz Yisroel, tefillah, Gemara, and the writings of the Chofetz Chaim.

His personality enabled him to see talent in others, allowing him to put together a tremendously gifted staff that he left largely to its own devices. He didn’t restrict or control the rabbeim, but rather allowed each rebbi to teach in his individual style. This provided each of the yeshiva’s talmidim with a variety of shiurim from which to choose according to *ma shelibo chofetz*, whatever the talmid’s heart desired.

Rav Schiller related that Rav Mendel often discussed the importance of remaining close to the talmidim. Yanking them from a secular life to a new world created a responsibility to make them part of one’s life and one’s extended family. Despite his busy schedule, Rav Mendel sometimes attended two or three simchos in one night in order to stay close to the Ohr Somayach world he had created. Despite Rav Mendel’s devotion to learning, his *dikduk b’mitzvos*, and his constant focus on *avodas hamiddos*, he was tolerant of his talmidim, especially in their earlier stages of progress, relating to each one *ba’asher hu shom*, according to where he was holding.

Despite Ohr Somayach's huge budget, Rav Mendel regarded every cent of the yeshiva as sacrosanct, to the extent of writing messages on the backs of old envelopes. Workers in the kitchen testified that never once did he ask someone to bring a meal from the kitchen to his office. He was rosh yeshiva for the yeshiva and not for himself.

Beyond his kiruv work and beyond the mitzvos that filled his life, his paramount love was always learning. During bein hazemanim, anyone entering the Mattersdorf bais medrash could be sure to find him there bent over seforim from morning to night. Late at night, after a grueling day, his children recall, he would go to bed with a sefer and learn until he fell asleep. Coming home after Shabbos davening, the first thing he did was pick up a sefer for a few minutes until the seudah.

In the early days of the yeshiva, when he sometimes played baseball with the talmidim, he would sit down and look into a sefer between innings. The talmid that related this story thinks he did this deliberately as an early lesson to the bochurim that even a few seconds are too valuable to waste.

Rav Mendel once confided that his greatest pleasure in life was to sit at a Gemara with a cup of tea. A close talmid said that whenever he entered a room holding a sefer, when Rav Mendel was in the middle of a meeting or consulting with someone, he noticed that Rav Mendel was always drawn like a magnet to the sefer he was holding. He simply could not resist asking him what he was in the middle of learning.

"Sometimes I made a game of it," the talmid confessed. "I would think of some reason to go into a room where he was busy just to see how the sight of a sefer snapped him out of his conversation and attracted him like a magnet."

FIGHTING UNTIL THE END

For the past few years, Rav Mendel had a long, difficult battle with illness. Yet, a talmid relates that even then, whenever he came across him in Shaarei Tzedek Hospital's chemotherapy ward, he would find Rav Mendel preoccupied with a sefer.

"Rav Mendel confided to me that this is where he found it possible to learn more than anywhere else," the talmid said.

Despite his illness and failing strength, Rav Mendel struggled to continue learning, speaking and teaching. During the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, when

he stumbled and fell during a *drashah*, he simply rose back up to his feet and continued where he had left off.

But in the end, Rav Mendel's *petirah* was sudden.

“We were walking home in the rain on Rechov Malchei Yisroel and stopped to look at the huge signs for a yom tefillah scheduled for tonight for a *refuah sheleimah* for Rav Mendel Weinbach,” one of our colleagues told us. “We talked about him. He was such a great, intelligent, eloquent speaker, so soft spoken, who was able to put his ideas in a nutshell in short, impressive, presentations. He understood human nature and was so kind, besides being a great *talmid chochom* and an influence on the lives of thousands. Moments later, my oldest daughter called to tell us he had passed away and that the *levaya* was to be held at Ohr Somayach at 2 p.m.”

Although people knew that Rav Mendel's health was failing, they were numbed at the news of his *petirah*. Who could fill his shoes?

HE LIVED FOR OTHERS

The *levaya* began at the Heichal Shmuel Bais Medrash in Mattesdorf at 1:15 p.m. and continued to Ohr Somayach in Maalot Dafna, where Rav Mendel was eulogized by his partner of all the years, Rav Nota Schiller, as well as Rav Dr. Yitzchok Breitowitz and a son. The building was so packed that many people stood outside, sheltered by umbrellas from the pouring rain.

Rav Schiller said in his *hesped* that it was fitting for Rav Mendel to have passed away on the 27th (*chof zayin*) of Kislev, for his learning and dissemination of Torah was pure, *zoch*, and *leSheim Shomayim*. Rav Schiller likened him to the grandfather of Shaul, who, the *Tanchumah* says, merited to have a royal grandson due to his custom of lighting lamps in dark alleyways. By the same token, Rav Mendel lit the light of Torah in the dark alleyways of the Western world. At the *levaya* of Rav Aharon Kotler zt"l, Rav Schiller said, the Satmar Rebbe praised him because, like Aharon, who did not alter Hashem's instructions of how to establish the *Mishkon*, so did Rav Aharon bring the Torah of Europe over to America without any alterations.

Rav Mendel had a great challenge: teaching Torah to people from a totally secular world, Rav Schiller said. Yet, to do this he did not alter anything. Rather, he was *mechadesh* a new path in inculcating them with unadulterated Torah, but the end products were unchanged from the *talmidei chachomim* of generations past. The Torah he taught was *shemen zayis zoch*.

Rav Breitowitz said in his *hesped* that Rav Mendel was like Rav Chiya, who forwent his own Torah development in order to ensure that Torah survived. He caught deer, wrote Torah scrolls on their hides, and taught Torah to groups of children. In the same way, he said, Rav Mendel forwent part of his potential personal growth in order to ensure that Torah survived among those who were in danger of being lost. He, too, deserves the Gemara's acclaim, "how great are the deeds of Chiya."

The Rambam says that a Jew's love of Hashem is expressed in his love of Jews, Rav Breitowitz continued. Rav Mendel couldn't bear to see ninety percent of the world's Jews fall by the wayside. Were they not also sons of Hashem?

This showed true *ahavas Hashem*, for to worry only about one's own greatness is to love oneself. As the Chasam Sofer says, the *nevi'im* describe no one as loving Hashem except Avrohom, who is called *Avrohom ohavi*, Avrohom who loves Me. For Avrohom exemplified the concept of bringing people back to Hashem.

After the *hespeidim*, which were kept brief due to the need for everyone to return home in time for *hadlokas neiros*, hundreds of talmidim, alumni, rabbonim and admirers took busses to Har Hamenuchos in the pouring rain to be present at the *kevurah*.

Yehi zichro boruch.