

A Blessed Trio

There are thousands of talmidim, tens of rebbeim, and probably millions around the world who were influenced by Harav Nota Schiller, zatzal. But there were only three members of his inner circle – the ones he called his “Mezuman.” Like the three required for birchas hamazon over a ‘kos’, these men enjoyed special blessing. They merited to serve the Rosh Yeshiva, and to become his partners in his life’s work.

Danny Lemberg, Yaakov Kaplan and George Karasik share their memories of being part of this special trio.



Reflections of Mr. Danny Lemberg

“To be Continued!”

Reb Danny Lemberg had always been impressed by Harav Schiller – but there was one incident that stands out as the start of his unique relationship with the Rosh Yeshiva.

There was a student whose parents were convinced that their son had gotten caught up in a cult. The boy’s father was a prestigious board member of one of the best law schools in the country – and one day, he came to take his son home. Eager to show his father what had so impressed him, the student introduced his father to his rabbi.

The meeting was a bomb. The rabbi had a strong black-and-white personality – completely the opposite of Harav Schiller’s style – and the father was incensed.

The incident caused a major brouhaha.

It wasn’t the first time this *rebbe* had been involved in upsetting confrontations. But this time, several members of the *hanhala* argued that he didn’t belong in Ohr Somayach.

“He’s just not suited for *kiruv*,” they argued. Rav Schiller listened, and seemed to be leaning towards letting him go. Danny Lemberg happened to be in the office when all this was going on – and something made him speak up.

“But this is the *rebbe* that was *mekarev* this boy,” he said. “His style is right for this *talmid*! He didn’t bring the other *rebbeim* to his father; he brought this one!” To Danny’s surprise, Rav Schiller heard him out – and made an about-face. He changed his mind, because a young *talmid* had shown a different perspective. That, to Danny, was incredible.

“He was a great man – but unlike most people in power, he wasn’t stuck on his opinion. I may have been a student, and been much younger than him, but he was able to change his mind – because it was the *emes*.” At that point, Danny was *mekabel* Rav Schiller as someone he wanted

to stay close to. That decision carried on for the rest of Harav Schiller's life, with Danny living and breathing the will of the Rosh Yeshiva.

Reb Lemberg recalls another 'cult' story.

One wealthy father spent most of his time sailing his yacht on the French Riviera. Convinced that his son had joined a cult, he came to Ohr Somayach to 'rescue' him.

"Why don't you join one day of classes?" Rav Schiller asked. The father agreed – and was hooked! He sold the boat, moved to Eretz Yisroel, and became a full-fledged *baal teshuvah*. He eventually married a woman from Meah Shearim, and lived there for twenty years!

Rav Schiller had this to say about parents who thought the yeshiva was a cult:

"Do you know how to tell the difference between Ohr Somayach and a cult? A cult leader sends his followers out to raise money, while he lives in luxury. In Ohr Somayach, I run around the world raising money, and leave my students in yeshiva!"

As a member of Rav Schiller's "*Mezuman*," Mr. Lemberg was extremely close to the Rosh Yeshiva. He spent countless meetings, meals and flights with Reb Nota, and had a front-seat view of an incredibly meaningful and fulfilling life.

The relationship began when Danny entered yeshiva for a short stint in learning. He was already successful in business, and Rav Schiller appeared to be a CEO-type figure he could relate to. Rav Schiller invited him to join his personal hand-picked *chaburah*. Each member of the group became a powerhouse, closely intertwined with Ohr Somayach. With an uncanny perception, Rav Schiller knew how to plug people into the position where they'd perform best.

"When I was ready to leave Ohr Somayach, Rav Schiller asked me to either stay and join the staff, or raise funds for the yeshiva," Danny recalls. For the rest of Harav Schiller's life, Danny remained his *shutef* – his partner in everything.

Danny once asked Rav Schiller: "Who is the real Reb Nota – the kind, *heimishe* warm person, or the majestic, standoffish CEO?" In truth, he switched personas according to need. He was kind and majestic and warm and regimented, all at the same time.

His self-discipline was remarkable. When he was diagnosed with high blood pressure, he chose not to take medication. Instead, he stopped eating salt and started exercising; finding swimming pools in every place he traveled to. He would say, "most records in baseball have been broken – besides for the record for consistently getting on base." (It's held by Ted Williams.)

For fifty-five years, Harav Schiller traveled to the US at least once a month to raise funds. That was besides for countless trips to other countries. In a testament to the delight people took in Harav Schiller's brilliance and wit, one American philanthropist promised him \$5000 a month for coming. Rav Schiller took him up on it, and quipped that at least his trip was covered!

"Rav Schiller said he wanted to be buried with his passports," Danny says. Little wonder. The little booklets offer a glimpse into his efforts for Hashem's children.

He would convey to donors: There are some donors who support Torah and others who support *kiruv* – but Ohr Somayach is "the best of both." It's *kiruv* because it's a 'yeshiva for late starters', but it's also a very real yeshiva! He took great pride in his *talmidim*'s achievements, and kept a pile of *sefarim* written by Ohr Somayach alumni near his desk – including many that are extremely popular in the Jewish world.

Reb Nota's trips were just one way he manifested his dedication to the yeshiva. At one point, when funds were low and the staff wasn't being paid, he sold his life insurance policy to cover payroll. When he traveled, he stayed with friends and borrowed their cars. His office on Coney Island Avenue in Flatbush included a bed, so he wouldn't have to spend yeshiva funds on hotel rooms.

That was besides for his role as a great *rosh yeshiva*! He was absolutely brilliant; an incredible *talmid chochom*. He gave thousands of *shiurim* – including his famous annual four-hour Tisha B'Av *shiur*, given without notes! Yet he never felt threatened by others.

He made sure the yeshiva was packed with *gedolim*. Harav Simcha Wasserman. Harav Nachman Bulman. Harav Moshe Schapiro. Harav Dov Schwartzman. Harav Mordechai Shakovitsky. All these giants, *zichronam livracha*, gave *shiurim* in Ohr Somayach. Reb Mordechai Izbee *zt"l* sat in the Beis Medrash. The yeshiva was accepted and recognized by *gedolei Yisroel*.

"Rav Schiller once told me that he had gotten an approbation from Reb Elyashiv addressed to himself and to Reb Noach Weinberg, *zatzal*, when they opened Shema Yisroel (the precursor to Ohr Somayach.) I had never seen it," Danny relates.

"I got a call one day from my friend Moshe Reich, a Klausenberger *chossid*. He said that he'd gone to Reb Elyashiv's grandson to buy *kisvei yad* from the Klausenberger Rebbe, and was looking through the family's collection when he found Rav Elyashiv's *haskamah* for their *baal teshuva* yeshiva. Reb Elyashiv's grandson included it in his purchase – and he gifted it to me." The letter hangs on a prominent wall in the Lemberg home.

Mentors Mission

Mr. Lemberg recalls the start of Ohr Somayach's Mentors Mission program:

"Harav Schiller invited me to a board meeting. When he asked me what I thought about it, I said, 'It's definitely a *bored* meeting! I was bored, so I scratched a new concept on the back of a napkin.' The idea was to bring *balebatim* to learn with college students.

"My reasoning was, If you're a priest, you don't get married. If you're an imam, you tell people to blow things up. What do people think of rabbis? Let's give the college boys people they can relate to. Let's have *frum* businessmen learn with them!"

The concept was controversial – and risky. It would mean getting people to take a week off from work. But Rav Schiller believed in it! And today, Mentors Mission is huge!"

As are so many other world-wide *kiruv* programs he initiated. Rav Schiller started programs in South Africa, England, Odessa, Flatbush, Monsey and more – and let others take the ball and run with it. It was never about himself – only about Hashem's children. And they were everywhere! Wherever he went, anywhere in the world, he met *talmidim* or their children.

He wasn't afraid to stand his ground. He led the yeshiva with love and understanding, without compromising, as he understood from his *rebbeim*.

At one point, people asked if he would do a mixed program. Others were doing it, and they most likely had good reasons. Reb Nota went to discuss it with his *rebbe*, Rav Shach *zatzal* – who told him to ask a *rav* in Yerushalayim. Reb Nota persevered.

"I'm asking you," he said. Rav Shach answered –

"Reb Nota, you're a yeshiva. A yeshiva is a yeshiva!"

To Reb Nota, that was confirmation from Rav Shach that Ohr Somayach is a yeshiva – in every sense of the word. There would be no compromise. The yeshiva would not veer from *hashkafas* haTorah. Ohr Somayach remains a men's-only yeshiva.

Mr. Lemberg often says that Ohr Somayach is not only a "yeshiva for late starters," it's also one of the biggest orphanages in the world – because the students are orphaned from their Father in Heaven! Reb Nota would treat them accordingly: he would feed, clothe, educate, house, and support them all; creating thousands of Jewish homes in the process.

Auspicious Beginning

Mr. Lemberg heard from Rav Yeruchem Olshin, Rosh Yeshiva of BMG, that his mother's brother, Rabbi Meilich Silber z"l, was trying to enroll boys in his yeshiva; Yeshiva of Eastern Parkway. The Schiller boys were on his list – but since there was only a class for one of them, their mother

said she was going to send them to public school, because she didn't want to separate them. Rabbi Silber heard her out, and came back a day later.

"We have a class for your son," he said. Mrs. Schiller enrolled both boys. The truth? He'd opened a new class for one child: Nota Schiller.

There's no telling what the Jewish world would look like today without Rabbi Silber's effort – and it's entirely possible that the experience molded Rav Schiller, so that he recognized the value of teaching Torah to every Jewish child.

Shteig, Nota! Shteig!



Reb Nota was a close *talmid* of Reb Shlomo Freifeld, *zt"l*. When Reb Freifeld went to Eretz Yisroel, Reb Nota accompanied him to the dock. Reb Freifeld shouted to him from the ship's deck:

Shteig, Nota! Shteig!

Mr. Lemberg recalls: When Reb Freifeld was sick, Reb Nota asked me to deliver an *esrog* to him, since I was to return to the States before Yom Tov. Reb Freifeld told me, "Reb

Nota could have been anything – he could have been a billionaire! He gave his life to Klal Yisroel!"

On Baseball and Bumps in the Road

A wellspring of Torah and clarity, Reb Nota lived in a different dimension. He saw the lesson in everything – from baseball to road bumps. He used both as parables to explain the need to stay within the guidelines of the *Shulchan Aruch*, even as he encouraged individuality and personal expression.

"You can't add a tenth and eleventh player to a baseball game," he would say. "It wouldn't be baseball!" As for bumps in the road, he likened Jewish life to a car's shock absorber. There's a coil that's flexible, so it can absorb the shock of going over a bump – but it has a top and a bottom. Judaism, too, can absorb flexibility, Rav Schiller said. We're not producing robots. But you can't go past the rubric of *halacha*!

Full Speed Ahead

As a young *bachur*, Rav Schiller learned in Yeshiva Ner Yisroel in Baltimore. One of the *rebbeim* would buy old cars from an army base in the area. They were very cheap – but there was a

catch. The cars, meant to ride around the army base, were equipped with a “governor on the accelerator” feature: they were set to never go above 40 mph.

When he established Ohr Somayach, Rav Schiller said he would not put a “governor on the accelerator.” This would be a yeshiva with no limits. Students would be encouraged to go full speed towards their potential – because anything less would mean shortchanging them. It’s no wonder that his students become top racers, and take pride of place as *marbitzei* Torah and leaders in the Jewish world!

On Time

Rav Schiller used to tell this story from his youth, as an example of how everything is absolute:

Nochum, one of the guys in yeshiva, took on a gig as a New Year’s Eve waiter in a Manhattan restaurant. The restaurant was hosting two separate parties on two separate floors; and Nochum was tasked with ringing the bell at exactly midnight – in both halls!

Ever innovative, he came up with a great solution: he would set the clock upstairs three minutes behind, and make it upstairs just ‘in time.’ Rav Schiller discussed if it was OK.

“It depends if time has value to these people. If time means something, then every minute really counts, and you can’t do it. But if these people live a relative type of existence where time is just something that happens by chance, it doesn’t make a difference!”

On Simcha

Harav Schiller was a deeply positive person. Even when the yeshiva was broke, he kept his spirits up. He said about *Iyov* –

“You can’t have *nevuah* without *simcha*. *Iyov* had to be *b’simcha*.”

On logic

Reb Nota would say –

“People aren’t logical; they’re psychological.” Their behavior doesn’t have to make sense to you. A person can know logically that he needs to get up at a certain time, but he can have psychological barriers that don’t let him act on that logic!

To Be Continued

Days before his *petirah*, when Rav Schiller’s condition took a turn for the worse, Danny flew to Eretz Yisroel to see him. The great *gadol* was weaving in out of consciousness, but when he saw Mr. Lemberg, he whispered –

“Tell me, how far is the yeshiva behind in salaries?” Those were his final words to his dear “Member of his *Mezuman*”; a testimony to a lifetime of selflessness. He didn’t say goodbye.

But that wasn’t unusual, because throughout his many travels, Rav Schiller would never say goodbye. Instead, he would wave and say, ‘to be continued.’

Today, Reb Danny Lemberg, and all of Klal Yisroel, look upon the *gadol’s* life work and say, ‘to be continued.’ It’s up to us to carry on.

Yehi zichro baruch.

Reflections of.... Mr. Yaakov Kaplan

“If it’s impossible – let’s do it!”



Yaakov Kaplan knows a thing or two about bridges. Grandson and protégé of the famous bridge builder and philanthropist Joseph Tanenbaum, he considers Rav Schiller *zatzal* – and Ohr

Somayach – the bridge that connects him to his Torah heritage. At the root of that connection is the incredible relationship between Rav Schiller and Mr. Tanenbaum.

The relationship was fundamental to Ohr Somayach's success – because Mr. Tanenbaum was a founding funder of the yeshiva.

Mr. Tanenbaum was known for taking on the impossible. While most bridges in the 70s were built on scaffolding and assembled mid-air, he came up with the idea of constructing a bridge on the ground, and then raising it into place, using new cranes he designed and built. He ignored the naysayers who said it would crash - and got that first bridge up way faster, safer, and cheaper than anyone could have imagined.

When Reb Nota presented him with the idea for Ohr Somayach, his first reaction was, "No one ever did anything like that before! It's impossible!" Then he caught himself and said – "Wait a minute. That's what I've always done, right? It's impossible? Let's do it!" And they did!



"Of all the things my grandfather did in his life – and he did many – nothing made him as happy as when he was with Reb Nota, and nothing gave him as much *nachas* as Ohr Somayach's success," Mr. Kaplan says.

This, despite the fact that Mr. Tanenbaum was not *shomer* Shabbos – until the day Rav Schiller said to him, "Joe, look, you're giving so much money to Torah education, and you don't keep Shabbos?" The 75-year-old tycoon put away his shaver, and from that week on, kept Shabbos.

"Rav Schiller would come to Toronto maybe eight or nine times a year," Kaplan recalls. "He would sit in my grandfather's office and observe the goings-on." On one such visit, 21-year-old Yaakov, who had been inducted into the family business, came to his grandfather.

"We were producing wheels for M60 tanks for the US Army, and one of the machine parts broke. It was a real problem – the part was incredibly hard to get." Rav Schiller listened to the conversation, and when Yaakov was about to leave the office, he said to him, "You should come to Israel some time to visit."

"I laughed," Mr. Kaplan says. "We had this major project going on! But my grandfather said, 'Well, if you finish the job by the due date, you can go to Israel.' Meaning, of course, that he would fund the trip."

And so, Yaakov came to Israel, toting his tennis racket, shorts, and plans to hit the beach. Then he sat in on a class in Ohr Somayach.

“I was doing my honors course in Philosophy and Political Science in McGill University, and couldn’t believe that the *rebbeim* in Ohr Somayach were talking about the same things as my world-famous professors! Rabbi Gottlieb, Rabbi Tatz, Rabbi Molevsky; they turned the lights on for me!” After that, he came to Ohr Somayach for seven weeks.

“Reb Nota was very warm, but there was no pressure. He never said, ‘you ought to keep Shabbos.’ But he did open the door.”

Soon, Rav Schiller asked his new student to join him at his Friday morning Pirkei Avos *shiur*; a special class where he handpicked students he wanted to be close to. Those students ended up being very involved in the yeshiva.

Rav Schiller became Yaakov’s trusted adviser. When he asked about dating, Reb Nota’s advice was spot-on: “If you’re going to stay in yeshiva, the girl you’re going to be interested in marrying today probably won’t be the one you want to go out with and marry in a year from now.”

Eventually, Mr. Kaplan took over his grandfather’s relationship with Rav Schiller. He became his *shutaf* – his partner, whom Rav Schiller would call upon regularly for everything related to Ohr Somayach.

People-Raising

If you have to encapsulate Harav Schiller into a few words, says Mr. Kaplan, it would be *ahavas Yisroel*. He was passionate about Torah study and Eretz Yisroel. But what drove him most was his love of every Jew. Reb Nota worked to garner support for the yeshiva, but it was always about people-raising; rather than fundraising.

“I never felt when he walked into a meeting that he was thinking, ‘how much money can I get from this person?’ His *tefillah* would have been, ‘Hashem, help me lift them up. Let me connect with them; with their Yiddishkeit.’” Rav Schiller’s attitude about fundraising was that it was an opportunity for the giver. He would say - “Why should they lose out on the opportunity, if they’re capable of giving?”

Nothing for Himself

Rav Schiller raised hundreds of millions of dollars for Ohr Somayach. But when the yeshiva struggled to meet payroll one year, he sold his car. It was 20 years old, and sold for just a few thousand shekel – not nearly enough to cover the shortfall. But he wouldn’t drive when the *rebbeim* were struggling. He took the bus for the next 20 years!

What would Harav Schiller want from us now? Yaakov Kaplan believes he knows the answer.

"I told the Mirrer Rosh Yeshiva, 'Look, if the Mirrer Yeshiva can have 10,000 students, Ohr Somayach can have 1000. Our market is much bigger! We're open to so many more people!' So that's what we're aiming for. Ohr Somayach 1000."

Of course, that would mean a tremendous expansion. With students clamoring for beds in the current dormitory, such growth would mean building more dormitories and classrooms. But Rav Schiller's already shown us the way.

"If it's impossible, let's do it!"

Reflections of....Mr. George Karasick

Torah Above All

The first time Mr. Karasick met Harav Schiller *zt"l*, was on a Mentors Mission, in 2010. Mr. Karasick had been a bit unsure about going – but like many who make the trip, he was hooked from the start.

"I became friends with Danny Lemberg and Yaakov Kaplan, and they asked me to join the board," he says. "A few years later, Rav Schiller asked me to be part of his *"Mezuman"* – it was his term – with Yaakov and Danny. Of course, I accepted. You didn't say 'no' to Rav Schiller." The three were *balebatim* he could confide in and talk to.

"Rav Schiller would call me whenever he was in New York. He would come to the West Side in Manhattan, learn with one or two people in the neighborhood, and then we would have dinner and discuss the yeshiva. When I went to Israel, my first phone call would always be to him."

With Rav Schiller, every conversation was fascinating. The talk would revolve around Torah – the *Meshech Chochmah*, a *Rambam* – and there was always a good bottle of wine and smoky scotch on the table.

"I think he viewed me as a 'rest station,' Mr. Karasick says. "I wasn't a *talmid*. He was able to talk to me differently."

“Project Perspire”

Rav Schiller had a very clear way of thinking about where things stood in the world, where Ohr Somayach was, and where he and his partner, Reb Mendel Weinbach, *zatzal*, stood.

There are other approaches to *kiruv* – outreach, events, and inspiration. But Ohr Somayach was never an ‘outreach program.’ It was always a yeshiva, “Capital Y,” that happened to serve *baalei teshuvah*. He believed that the key to *kiruv* is the authenticity of a *blatt* Gemara.

“He called it ‘Project Perspire.’ You sweat your way through the Gemara.” This emphasis on learning means that the yeshiva produces many *rabbonim*, *dayanim* and *mechabrei seforim*. His greatest pride was when his *talmidim* made *siyumim*, finished *mesechtes*, and became real *bnei Torah*.

“Someone once overheard me saying that I’d been on a Mentors Mission,” Mr. Karasick reminisces. “He turned to me and said he was an Ohr Somayach *talmid*.”

‘I’m visiting my non-religious mother, but my own son is a *dayan* in Eretz Yisroel!’ That is what Ohr Somayach is about. Turning people into *bnei Torah*, for generations.

Ohr Somayach’s Mentors Missions, serving college students who know literally nothing about Yiddishkeit, are lots of fun – but they, too, revolve around Torah. Every day starts with learning and continues with touring. But the boys are so enamored; they spend the entire bus ride talking about the Gemara! It’s incredible!

Making the Pitch

Early on in Ohr Somayach’s trajectory, in the 1970s, a friend introduced Rav Schiller to a potential donor. Rav Schiller made his pitch, asking for \$25,000. The donor agreed on the spot. When he left, the friend said –

“You’re never going to enjoy a penny of this donation. It came too easy. You’re always going to regret not asking for more.”

Lesson well learned. Moving forward, Rav Schiller became more aggressive in his fundraising. He asked for more – and often got it!

Blue Brilliance

The people running the Mentors Mission wanted to plan a trip to a *techeiles* factory, but Rav Schiller vetoed their plans. He kept saying no, until they asked Mr. Karasick to speak to him.

“I know it’s a very interesting trip,” Rav Schiller said. “But these boys are very impressionable. After they go there, they’re going to have to have *techeiles*.” He was three steps ahead of

everyone else – and wouldn't expose the mentees to something that most *poskim* today don't condone.

"He saw what others didn't see. That was part of his brilliance," Mr. Karasick said.

Web of Influence

At a time when the internet was young and few people recognized its dangers, Rav Schiller had uncanny clarity of mind. He was rightfully nervous about it – yet allowed Ohr Somayach's online presence. Eventually, ohr.edu turned into one of the yeshiva's greatest tools, because that was where the college students discover Torah.

Upbeat. Always.

Reb Nota had an amazing ability: when things didn't work out, he never got down. It could be a disappointing donation, or something else – it didn't matter. He would throw up his hands and move on. He never showed disappointment. It was an incredible *middah*.

Eye on the Ball

Ever the baseball fan, Reb Nota would constantly use baseball as a parable to drive his point home. He would tell students: The whole point is getting the ball from the outfield to the infield. Stay in the infield. Stay in Torah.

Looking back at his life, Harav Schiller was a multifaceted master at his game. He went for the Big Leagues – and always knew whom to pitch to, how to pitch, and how to catch a soul mid-air, so that he could bring it back to base, and make a home run that would impact generations.