

HaRav Nota Schiller zt"l - Divrei Zicharon

by Harav Yitzchak Breitowitz

Rav of Kehilas Ohr Somayach

Rav Nota z"l felt very strongly that we should not refer to secular literature and sources within the hallowed walls of the *beis midrash*. As such, when I had the sad *kavod* of being *maspid* him, I honored his request. Nevertheless, I have to admit that in thinking about this great and unusual man, two secular references came into my head.

The first was James Fennimore Cooper's, "*The Last of the Mohicans*." Rav Nota was the last survivor of a heroic, courageous group of visionaries who saw hope when others saw despair, who saw light where others saw darkness, who actually believed that it would be possible to bring unaffiliated Jews back to G-d through undiluted, uncompromising *limud haTorah* mixed with profound love and respect.

Many ridiculed this project as a fool's errand, but these visionaries persevered with commitment and *emunah* - *emunah* in Hashem, *emunah* in themselves, *emunah* in the *pintele Yid*. Rav Noach Weinberg, Rav Mendel Weinbach, Rav Nachman Bulman, Rav Yaakov Rosenberg, Rav Meir Shuster, HaGaon Harav Moshe Shapiro, *kulam zichronom livracha*, and now they have been joined in the Olam HaEmes by our dear Rebbe, Harav Nota Schiller, z"l. He was among the first and he was the last of the pioneer generation. He laid the foundations for kiruv *rechokim*. All who are involved in this great *avodas hakodesh* are building on those foundations.

The second reference that popped into my head was a poem by Walt Whitman. The Gemara in *Baba Basra* 91a tells us that when Avraham Avinu died, all the great leaders of the nations proclaimed, "Alas to the world that has lost its leader, alas to the boat that has lost its captain".

In my mind's eye, I envisioned Rav Nota as a captain, skillfully steering the boat of Am Yisrael through the turbulent, dangerous waters of secularism, hedonism, assimilation and intermarriage. This in turn reminded me of Whitman's poem, "*Captain, My Captain*", a moving heartbreaking elegy about Abraham Lincoln steering the ship of state through the turbulence and ravages of the Civil War, only to be cut down at the height of his success.

We lost our captain, our leader, our guide, our rebbe, but he brought so many ships back to the port safely and he gave us the tools to continue to bring back, *b'ezras Hashem*, so many more .

Rav Nota spent much of his time traveling to collect money for the yeshiva. Sometimes, he went to the US as many as three times a month. Even when he was aging and not in the best of health, he was unrelenting in his *mesiras nefesh*. He pursued a schedule that would exhaust someone who was 30 years younger. But he went on and on until the point of utter exhaustion, and then after reaching that point, went on and on again. As he told Reb Nachshon, “a soldier in the middle of battle does not and cannot abandon his post because of discomfort. The job is too important; the stakes are too high.”

There is no doubt in my mind that much of the success Ohr Somayach has achieved is a Divine reward for the unbelievable *mesiras nefesh* of its great founder, z”l.

Rav Nota's office is right next to mine, and when the Rosh Yeshiva was in town, he would often pop in to tell me a story, express a *chiddush* in Torah, or even share a joke; albeit one that always had an important lesson to teach. No matter how tired he was, or how many problems the yeshiva was facing -- and the burden of every single one of them was resting on his shoulders -- the things I vividly recall were his *simcha*, sense of humor, passion, and enthusiasm.

He did not allow himself to be defeated. He met his challenges with joy, and because his enthusiasm was infectious, it was always a joy to be around him. But side by side with the joy was his utter brilliance. Brilliance in Torah might be expected in a Rosh Yeshiva but he was conversant in literature, philosophy, history, politics, baseball (a special favorite!), high culture and indeed even low culture. He expressed himself beautifully, with unforgettable epigrams and analogies. But he was also so wise in the *chochmas hachaim*.

He had lived in many different worlds, met many different types of people - he was an athlete, a *talmid*, a *rebbe*, an administrator, a fundraiser, a *rosh yeshiva*, a husband, a father, a grandfather. He knew many different types of *gedolim*, and he absorbed from all of them. He knew many different types of *baalei batim*, and he learned from them as well. And he knew his share of scoundrels and shady characters, and they too taught him lessons, e.g., what to avoid; what not to do.

The richness, the wealth of his Torah learning, his mastery of *chochma*, and his deep and diversified life experience, combined with his penetrating creative analytical mind to give him deep insights which were both profound and practical at the same time - a combination difficult to achieve, and indeed quite rare.

Rav Nota was brilliant, Rav Nota was absolutely committed to his cause and to his mission. In most people, these qualities might create a kind of dictatorial personality along the lines of "my way or the highway." Yet in his case, nothing could be further from the truth. He appreciated all types of people, he genuinely liked them, he respected them. He reveled and got *nachas* even from their secular accomplishments. He understood that different students need different approaches, and chose a staff of educators who excel in their diversity.

The common denominator is a passion for Torah and a deep love for *talmidim*, but beyond that, the motto was "*chanoch l'naar al pi darko*." Rav Nota did not insist on, nor did he want, a cookie cutter faculty or a cookie cutter yeshiva. Every person has unique *kochos*, talents and *tafkidim*, and our job is to help *talmidim* reveal those *kochos*. We are not here to destroy or denigrate; we are here to uncover and reveal the beautiful essence that is within, that is already there even before the person is fully aware of it. Thus, Ohr Somayach graduates are *roshei yeshiva*, *rabbonim*, *mechanchim*, *mechabrei seforim*; but also lawyers, doctors, accountants, and businessmen who contribute in myriad ways to Klal Yisrael . And we are proud of them all!

Chaval al d'avdin v'lo mishtakchin! We have lost someone who is irreplaceable. Even when he was not able to be fully involved in the yeshiva because of his failing health, we felt his spirit, his encouragement, his love, and that gave all of us *chizuk*. We are bereft - we have lost our father, *yesomim hayinu v'ein av!* But he gave us the tools to continue his great work. He gave us a sense of mission, a sense of *acharayus*. His body may be physically gone, but the lessons he imparted remain forever. And as long as we absorb those lessons, Rav Nota continues to guide us.

May the Rebbetzin and all the family be comforted in the knowledge that his great work will continue *ad bias go'el* and beyond. *Yehi zichro baruch!*