

Hagaon Harav Nota Schiller zt”l

Rosh Yeshivas Ohr Somayach

HESPED

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Harav Nota Schiller zt”l was not just a *rebbe* to his *talmidim*; he was a father to his *talmidim*. Most of Rav Schiller's *talmidim* had no Jewish education or *mesorah* from their secular families - and he was their spiritual father. He taught them to revere Torah and *mitzvos*; he taught them how to approach life.

Rav Schiller zt”l didn't believe that a *baal teshuva* should just be a person who is observant; who keeps Shabbos and *kashrus*, and puts on *tefillin*. He wanted his *talmidim* to be "regular" *frum* Jews who can fit seamlessly into a *frum* community. His desire was that wherever his *talmidim* end up living, they be regular "card carrying" members of their respective communities. Whether they live in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Passaic, Edison, Toronto, Chicago, London, Johannesburg or Melbourne, they should be indistinguishable from their contemporaries who were raised observant. They should not have "*Baal Teshuva*" painted across their foreheads.

How was the *rosh yeshiva zatzal* able to successfully achieve this goal? How was he able to get his *talmidim* to be "regular" members of the *frum* community? He achieved this by stressing to his *talmidim* the preeminence and importance of learning Torah. He insightfully understood that if a *baal teshuva* did not "catch up" to his 'frum-from-birth' contemporaries in learning, he would be severely hampered in his ability to raise a *frum* family.

That is why Ohr Somayach graduates are so successful in staying observant after they leave yeshiva, and why their children are following in their parents' footsteps! When a *baal teshuva* can prepare *Gemara* with *Rishonim* by himself without using Artscroll; and when he can open a *Mishna Berura* by himself, he feels like a "regular" *frum* Jew, and he raises healthy *frum* children. That is part of the *hashkafa* that the *rosh yeshiva* established in Ohr Somayach.

But we must ask ourselves:

“How was the *rosh yeshiva* able to impart this tremendously valuable and important *hashkafa* and message to his *talmidim*? Part of the answer was, by personal example. Whenever you walked into his office, he would immediately begin to tell you *chiddushei* Torah. He would continue to tell you *chiddushim*, until you had to leave to give a *shiur* or to meet someone. That personal example was worth a thousand words!

Secondly, the *rosh yeshiva* always brought in the leading *talmidei chachamim* of the generation, to impress upon the *talmidim* the importance and centrality of learning Torah. Great luminaries such as Rav Nachman Bulman, Rav Moshe Shapira, and Rav Dov Schwartzman, *zichronam livracha*, and, *yibadel l'chaim*, Rav Aharon Feldman, *shlita*, all had major teaching roles in Ohr Somayach. Currently, Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz and Rav Asher Weiss, *shlita*, have prominent roles in Ohr Somayach.

In *Parshas Chayei Sarah*, Avraham Avinu sends his servant Eliezer to find a *shidduch* for his son Yitzchak. He makes two requirements: First, the girl must be from his family in *chutz la'áretz*, and not from the Canaanite girls who dwell in the land of Israel; and second, she must come to the land of Israel to live with Yitzchak.

What are the odds of such a *shidduch* being successful? Practically none! However, since Avraham Avinu believed that this was the right *shidduch* for his son, he didn't compromise on his principles. He demanded that Eliezer follow his instructions exactly, even if the odds were stacked against him. And since Avraham Avinu stuck to his vision, and to his principles of what is right, Hashem helped him find the perfect *shidduch* for Yitzchak.

We find the same thing with the *rosh yeshiva*, *zatzal*, and his lifelong partner in Ohr Somayach, Rav Mendel Weinbach *zatzal*. When they planned to start a yeshiva for *baalei teshuva*, everyone discouraged them. People said it was impossible to bring Jews back to *teshuva*.

Today, we understand the reality of the *baal teshuva* movement as a given fact. Thirty percent of the Torah community in Eretz Yisroel are *baalei teshuva* or the children of *baalei teshuva*! But when the Roshei Yeshiva *zatzal* started Ohr Somayach in the 1970's, it was considered impossible that secular Jews would return to Torah observance!

These two great *tzaddikim* were discouraged in their efforts, and were told that they were wasting their time. But like Avraham Avinu, they persisted against all odds, and continued with their project. And look at the success which they achieved!

Tens of thousands of families have become Torah observant and true *bnei* Torah through Ohr Somayach! Four generations of *talmidim*, where the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren have all remained observant and are *bnei* Torah! We can learn from the example of these great *tzaddikim* that we must persist with our Torah projects - even when the task in front of us seems insurmountable. When we stick to our vision and principles, we are given great *siyata dishmaya*.

The Rosh Yeshiva *zatzal* was a man of many exceptional talents. He had an amazingly sharp mind, and he possessed extraordinary leadership abilities. When he walked into a room, you immediately felt leadership and nobility. He also possessed an amazing command of the English language, utilizing words that most of us did not comprehend. He was also a very gifted writer. He really could have succeeded at anything in life, whether in Torah study, the world of commerce, politics, or anything else.

Yet he gave all of these extraordinary abilities to Hashem, to bring His children home as *baalei teshuva*. He knew that this was his mission in life, and he dedicated every fiber of his being to accomplish this mission. He never thought about himself for a minute. It was all for the *kevod shamayim* and bringing Jews back to Torah and *mitzvos*. Rav Wolbe *zt"l* said that the definition of a *gadol* is a person who uses all of his abilities to serve Hashem. The Rosh Yeshiva was certainly a *gadol* who used all of his abilities to increase *kevod shamayim*.

At the end of the Chumash, the *Medrash Rabbah* says that the evil Bilaam was a prophet who was on the same level as Moshe Rabbeinu. This is very difficult to understand! How could the wicked and corrupt Bilaam be a prophet on the level of Moshe Rabbeinu? To answer this question, the great Maharil Diskin explains that Bilaam saw all of the same prophetic visions which Moshe Rabbeinu saw. However, those visions stayed in his mind, and were unable to penetrate his emotions and his body. Because his body and emotions were impure, the prophetic visions were not integrated into his being.

On the other hand, Moshe Rabbeinu was able to fully integrate his prophetic visions into his being, and he was able to pass them on to the Jewish people. We could say the same thing about the Rosh Yeshiva *zt"l*. Whatever thoughts there were in his brilliant mind were also in his heart and in his body. He was totally integrated, and therefore was able to pass his Torah to his *talmidim*.

That is why it is very fitting that we are reading the *parshiyos* pertaining to the Mishkan during this period when the Rosh Yeshiva was *niftar*. Our sages tell us that the Beis Hamikdash and the Mishkan are referred to as a "neck." This seems to be a very strange description of the holy Mishkan and Beis Hamikdash! However, we could explain this concept that the Mishkan and Beis Hamikdash were the bridge between the spiritual and the physical in our world. Through them, spirituality was able to descend into our world.

The neck of a person connects the spiritual and physical parts of a person. The head is the more rational, spiritual part of the person, and the body is the more physical part. The neck is the bridge between the two parts. Like the Beis Hamikdash, the spirituality of the Rosh Yeshiva *zatzal* was fully integrated into all parts of his being.

It is also very fitting that the Rosh Yeshiva was *niftar* during the week that we are busy preparing for Purim. During Purim, the Jews did a major *teshuva* for participating in the *seudah* of Achashverosh. They not only did *teshuva*, but they accepted the Torah a second time out of love. On Shavuos, we accepted the Torah out of fear, but on Purim, we accepted it a second time out of love. By doing so, the Jews merited the great miracles which occurred on Purim.

Isn't it fitting the "The King of Teshuva," Rav Nota Schiller, *zatzal*, should leave us now? During the time of *teshuvah*! During a time of *kabbalas* HaTorah out of love!

We have so much to learn from this great man, and hopefully, with Hashem's help, we can follow in his giant footsteps. *Yehi zichro boruch*.