

Rav Nota Schiller: The Great Innovator

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Rav Nota *zt"l* was unique. I first heard him speak as a *bachur*, when I joined my father on one of the famous Mentors Missions, where *baalei batim* come to learn Torah with beginning college students. I was blown away.

The way he spoke with such conviction and tenacity. His rigorous belief in the truth, power and ultimate relevance of Torah. His mastery of language. His power of metaphor. His message: unapologetic and infectious. I knew then that one day, this would be a mission I would align myself with.

I had learned in classical *yeshivos* and *kollelim*, prior to being offered the position of helping launch the J101 program at Ohr Somayach; a 10-month learning and internship program for beginners to Jewish thought. For the better part of a decade, it has, and continues to be, a most exhilarating and fulfilling position, where I take part in the execution of Rav Nota's mission of bringing Yidden back to Hashem, through in-depth study of the Torah itself.

Aside from our impactful in-person interactions as faculty in Ohr Somayach, I also had the honor, during the COVID pandemic, of conducting tens of hours of interviews with Rav Nota, (subsequently released on the Ohr Somayach podcast) where we unpacked the history of the *teshuva* movement, the personalities involved, and the lessons learned in the development of the greatest innovative movement within Judaism, perhaps since Sarah Shenirer's founding of Bais Yaakov.

These insightful discussions revealed the architecture of a movement; and the depth of thought of a one-of-a-kind visionary.

In one conversation among many, I asked the Rosh Yeshiva how he would define the unique sales proposition of Ohr Somayach. After all, there are so many yeshivos out there, each with their own *derech* and flavor, catering to the colorful, varied demographics of the Jewish world. Rav Nota's unequivocal answer was, "We are the learning people, we are the People of the Book."

The marching orders of his Rebbi, Rav Yitzchak Hutner *zt"l*, always stood before his eyes.

"If your students remain a cult unto themselves, you've failed. But if they can integrate into the *Olam HaTorah*, that's success". Rav Nota celebrated the goalposts along the way, but led with

the ultimate vision of empowering late beginners in becoming future authentic Bnei Torah, with the ability to develop their own *cheilek* in Torah.

He held the unwavering belief that beginners could truly become independent learners of Jewish texts, in their original Hebrew/ Aramaic format; and over time, with the required effort, blossom into authentic *talmidei chachamim*. Rav Nota lived with a tenacious belief in the ability of the light ensconced in Torah, as the most formidable tool to bring our brothers without a Torah or yeshiva background to the truth and sweetness of authentic Judaism.

Every Jew has an inborn right to a Jewish education. That was Rav Schiller's rallying cry. The *rebbeim* and *talmidim* at Ohr Somayach still feel it flowing through our veins.

We're living through the ultimate paradox. It's a darker world without the Rosh Yeshiva. But his impact continues to illuminate the world, through the thousands he impacted personally, and through the movement he founded and directed, which continues to grow and flourish.