

Harav Mendel Weinbach, zt"l, Rosh Yeshivah, Yeshivas Ohr Somayach

BY YEHUDA MARKS

Harav (Chuna) Menachem Mendel Weinbach, a pioneer of the modern-day *baal teshuvah* movement and cofounder and dean of Ohr Somayach Institutions, was *niftar* last Monday after courageously battling a long and painful illness. He was 79.

Harav Weinbach was the beloved mentor, father and *rebbe* to generations of Ohr Somayach *talmidim* around the world. And as a prolific author and sought-after lecturer for both men's and women's groups across the globe, Harav Weinbach's zeal and power were a source of inspiration for thousands of others.

From the many *talmidim* at the *levayah*, one heard the same short sentence over and over again.

"I felt he was my father; I had nobody closer in my life," was how they all felt.

In fact, his son said that at home there was an argument between the children as to whom Harav Weinbach loved more — them, or his *talmidim*.

Harav Weinbach was born on 4 Tishrei, 5694/1933 in Galicia, Poland. Before the outbreak of World War II, his parents, Reb Yechezkel Shraga and Tshezye Ginendel, moved the family to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

He learned in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, where he received *semichah*, and later in Bais Medrash Elyon in Monsey.

In 1960 he married, *tbl"c*, Sheindel Lamm, an orphaned Holocaust survivor whose parents, Avraham Yisrael and Rachel Lamm, *Hy"d*, from Belgium, were murdered in Auschwitz. She arrived in New York at the age of 5 and was raised by her uncle and aunt, Shimshon and Lotte (Leah Yehudis) Lamm.

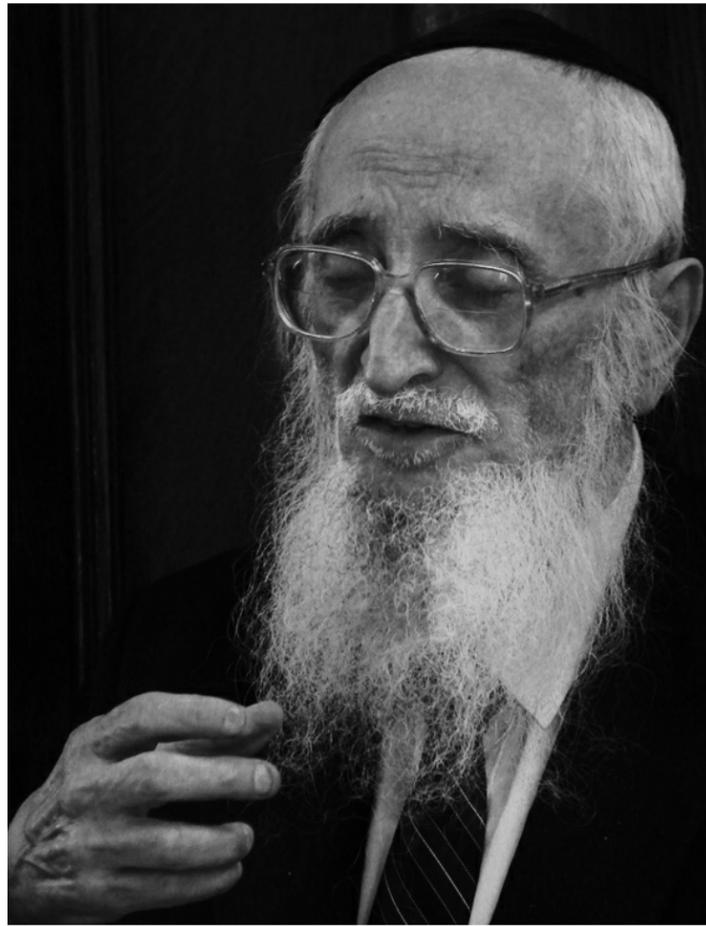
Two years after their marriage, the young Weinbachs moved to Mattersdorf, Yerushalayim, where Harav Weinbach later established the Heichal Shmuel *beis medrash*.

Kiruv Through Torah

In the early 1970s, Harav Weinbach, together with Harav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, and, *ybl"c*, Harav Nota Schiller, founded Yeshivas Shema Yisrael for *baalei teshuvah*, which was later renamed Ohr Somayach. Harav Weinbach, along with Harav Schiller, *ybl"c*, headed the yeshivah until his last days.

But even before the yeshivah was founded, he would encourage others to donate hours for learning with *baalei teshuvah*, as well as donating his own time for such learning.

He was part of a volunteer group consisting of *avreichim* from Mir, Brisk, Chevron and other yeshivos who would contribute an hour here and



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there to learn with these newcomers who could not yet fit into a conventional yeshivah.

Eventually, Harav Weinbach realized the need for a specially designed framework for these students. And that is how Ohr Somayach was begun.

Various reasons have been given as to why Harav Weinbach chose to name the yeshivah after Harav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, the Ohr Somayach.

His son mentioned at the *levayah* that Harav Weinbach's goal was to establish a center that would battle the secular culture challenging *Klal Yisrael*, and *sin-mem-ches* is the acronym for Shabbos, *milah* and *chodesh*, the three *mitzvos* the Greeks wanted to annul.

Harav Weinbach established Ohr Somayach to fight the Yevanim and bring lost Jews back to their roots; how appropriate that his *petirah* was in the middle of Chanukah, commemorating the battle against the Yevanim.

Harav Yitzchak Breitowitz, a *talmid* who later became a *maggid shiur* in the yeshivah, would say that aside from his greatness in outreach, Harav Weinbach was a *gaon* in Torah.

Even when he was extremely busy, he was able to prepare "with lightning speed" deep *shiurim*, quoting and clarifying the words of the *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*.

"No doubt, he could have grown much higher in Torah, becoming a leading *talmid chacham*," Harav Breitowitz said, "yet his incomparable, over-

flowing *ahavas Yisrael* made him give up his personal advancement in Torah and devote himself to *Klal Yisrael*."

Harav Weinbach chose Yerushalayim as the center of his activities, claiming that the Holy City played a great part in the organization's success.

"Although we have Ohr Somayach branches around the world, as well as many projects in America, which are all doing well, nothing can compare to

Every Jew and His Personal Avodas Hashem

Harav Weinbach's strength wasn't just the sheer number of Jews he brought to Torah, but how he did it. Harav Weinbach understood that each Jew finds Hashem in his own way, and he found the way for each Jew to find Torah and *avodas Hashem* — and make it his own.

He would quote the Rambam, who writes in *Hilchos Avodah Zarah* that Avraham Avinu, the first "kiruv activist," would answer every person according to his knowledge.

"Interestingly, we can hear the same question hundreds of times, and I don't think I've given the same answer twice!" he said. "We find the answer that the person asking the question will relate to, a gift that is acquired with experience."

With beauty, love and truth, he found the way to the hearts of so many lost *neshamos*.

Even after a *talmid* left yeshivah, Harav Weinbach bore him on his shoulders, acting as a father and *rebbe*; he guided his *talmidim* with unending patience and understanding. He felt so close to his *talmidim* that their *simchos* were his, and he made every effort to actively participate in his *talmidim*'s weddings, and the *brisos*, bar mitzvahs and weddings of their children.

The Light of Torah Study

In the earlier years, Harav Weinbach's *talmidim* came from *mekarvim* such as Rabbi Meir Schuster and Jeff Seidel, who would pick up people at the Kosel — especially young Jewish backpackers — and send them to Ohr Somayach.

courses dropped, in favor of business courses. And the business student was more organized in budgeting his time and energy. Backpacking became less popular; consequently, fewer Jewish backpackers came to the Kosel.

As *hashgachah* would have it, before Black Monday Ohr Somayach had already begun bringing students in directly.

This enabled Harav Weinbach, who was never prepared to take shortcuts, to adhere to his *shitah* of getting the *talmidim* into the learning of Torah. Unlike the backpackers who were sitting on their suitcases, Harav Weinbach could now dedicate his time to those who remained for longer periods of time at the yeshivah.

Although Harav Weinbach would not immediately start with *Gemara*, he did want his fresh *talmidim* to begin as soon as possible.

"We have witnessed how the *ma'or shebah*, the light of Torah, brings them back to *Yiddishkeit*," he would say.

"Nothing works like the magic of *Gemara*," was his motto.

Harav Weinbach admitted that other factors, like the Shabbos meals, are also vital in *kiruv* work. In fact, many of us have noted that a Rebbetzin's cholent has often contributed more to the *teshuvah* process than a given lecture!

Yet he stressed that the study of *Gemara* means *eisek haTorah*, being involved in Torah, engaged in Torah. When the newcomers learn *Gemara* in a *shiur*, or with their *chavrusa*, it's no longer a passive enterprise. *Yiddishkeit* requires being



The Ohr Somayach *beis medrash* during the *hespeidim*.

the *kedushah* of Yerushalayim," he would say. In addition, he would explain that a strong element in *kiruv* is detaching the secular Jew from his environment, which occurs when they come to learn in Yerushalayim.

However, after 1987's Black Monday, when the stock markets around the world crashed, university students became more concerned with finance, and were less motivated to see the world. Enrollment in humanities

intellectually and practically proactive to facilitate our coming closer to Hashem.

This *shitah* was the basis for the more concentrated JLE (Jewish Learning Exchange) course, getting the newcomers into *Gemara* study.

With JLE, Harav Weinbach was able to bring over hundreds of boys from America, Canada, England and South Africa for a three- to four-week course in Ohr Somayach, during which time they were introduced to *Gemara*.

This isn't an easy approach to *chazarah bi'teshuvah*, but knowing this was the correct way, he went into it full force.

Harav Weinbach would relate the following story: When he first started the Ohr Lagolah program, the Education Ministry sent a supervisor to check up on their work.

After meeting with the boys and taking part in the program, the impressed supervisor said that it was lucky he hadn't been the one to initiate this project.

"If I had wanted to launch such a project, I would first have had to think over how to explain the *Gemara* basics to nonreligious boys, how to explain a *chasarei mechsera v'hachi katani* and other such rules, and would have first taken a several-year-long university course in these subjects," he said. "And in the end, it is very unlikely that I would have had the capability to give over these concepts; I would have therefore dropped the idea!"

But Harav Weinbach wasn't put off by the potential hurdles, and launched the program, with each *maggid shiur* and *rebbe* finding the right answer to the boys' questions and difficulties in *Gemara* study.

Harav Weinbach would explain that one of the main purposes of *Gemara* study is to achieve *emunas chachamim*, without which one cannot understand the *masores* and halachic life.

"Nothing fosters *emunas chachamim* more than the intellectual challenge of learning *Gemara*. The *emunas chachamim* grows as the skills and depth grow," he said. "Learning Torah without *emunas chachamim* would be pointless, lifeless and inevitably distorting."

Tackling the questions of still nonreligious Jews, who would mention the damage that fringe individuals in the *chareidi* world do to the *chareidi* image, Harav Weinbach would say that the questions about warts and scars are only a proof that the *chareidi* world is composed of normal people, not angels.

"Yes, we tell the boys that these bad examples are also part of the *chareidi* world, since *chareidim* have the same *yetzer hara* as others," he explained. "Yet despite this, we are the most exemplary group in Israeli society, which shows that anybody can become part and parcel of this select circle of *shomrei Torah umitzvos*."

Harav Weinbach rejected the view that *kiruv* is only for the professionals, arguing that anybody and everybody could be a *machzir bi'teshuvah*.

Over seven years ago, Mr. Daniel Lemberg, a local Lake-wood businessman, pioneered



Past and present *talmidim* gathered on short notice in the pouring rain to accompany their beloved *rebbe* on his last journey.

bringing *baalei batim* to Eretz Yisrael to participate in *kiruv* programs. This initiative has evolved into the biannual Mentors Mission, spearheaded by Mr. Lemberg, Rabbi Shmuel Bloom and Yaakov Kaplan of Toronto. Harav Weinbach said that the Mentors Mission was not a one-time experience; the men maintained contact with the boys they had learned with, and he organized frequent reunions to see how the boys were progressing.

With his Mentors Mission, Harav Weinbach wanted to get everybody active in *kiruv*.

"There are few Jews who haven't heard of Ohr Somayach, and every nonreligious boy can know where to turn if he intends to become religious. What we are trying to do is to get the *frum* community in Eretz Yisrael and the whole world into the *kiruv* process," he said.

"That is the goal of our Mentors Mission, to get the *bnei Torah* active in *kiruv*."

Harav Weinbach's accomplishments continued with his Ohr Lagolah program, which has been running for over 20 years, training *bnei Torah* to become teachers and *kiruv* educators.

"*Baruch Hashem*, we have 300 Hertz Institute-Ohr Lagolah graduates who are teaching, administrating, and active in *kiruv* on college campuses, in community outreach *kollelim*, in shuls and Jewish schools throughout the U.S., Canada, Europe, South Africa and Australia," he said.

"Jewish communities worldwide desperately need dedicated young people who are trained to translate Judaism into the language of the 21st century. Our Ohr Lagolah program, which is accredited with the Israeli Ministry of Education, trains *bnei Torah* in the art of communicating and relaying Judaism to Jews of all backgrounds."

Harav Weinbach viewed *teshuvah* in a minimum and maximum way. While he aimed for a minimum — producing Jews who were *shomrei mitzvos* — he was especially proud of those *talmidim* who

reached the maximum — full-fledged *bnei Torah* who live a Torah life.

"Walk into the Mir Yeshiva, and you'll find at least 50 Ohr Somayach graduates devoting their lives to Torah, and excelling," he would say.

intense *siyatta diShmaya* that *baalei teshuvah* get. In only a few years, they can reach the level in Torah study of *bnei Torah* who have been learning for many years," he said. "And even those who don't become full-fledged *bnei Torah* at least



Harav Weinbach (L) with his colleague of over 50 years, Harav Nota Schiller, *Rosh Yeshiva*, Yeshivas Ohr Somayach.

That is why he was unrelenting in making sure that the higher *shiurim* are on the highest level, competing with the top *shiurim* in the best yeshivos, and his *talmidim* reached the highest levels of *hasmadah* and Torah knowledge.

Harav Weinbach would explain the phenomenon of those who are relatively new to *Yiddishkeit* reaching the level of *frum* people who have been practicing *shemiras hamitzvos* for years, with the *Gemara* that says, "*B'makom shebaalei teshuvah omdim ein tzaddikim gemurim yecholim laamod* — In the place where *baalei teshuvah* stand, even complete *tzaddikim* cannot stand."

"This demonstrates the

regular *chareidi*," the *Rosh Yeshiva* stressed.

However, he immediately added, our *chinuch* system is important, since we cannot risk the dangers of our children remaining entrenched in *tumah*, nor would these *baalei teshuvah* dare bring up their children the way they were educated.

Harav Weinbach was not only busy with *baalei teshuvah*. Sadly, *chareidi* circles have recently directed more attention to at-risk teenagers and dropouts, and in the past few years he was also involved in "*kiruv kerovim*," those who came from *frum* households and dropped out.

"*Kiruv kerovim* is as important, if not more so, than *kiruv rechokim*," he would say.

The *levayah* left from Beis Haknesses Heichal Shmuel in Mattersdorf, where the *maspidim* were Harav Yisrael Gans, Harav Yitzchak Ehrenfeld, Harav Yaakov Bornstein, and Harav Weinbach's son, Harav Yechezkel. It continued at Yeshivas Ohr Somayach, with thousands of *talmidim* and admirers accompanying Harav Weinbach on his last journey.

After *hespeidim* delivered by the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshivas Ohr Somayach, Harav Nota Schiller; Harav Yitzchak Breitowitz, a leading *maggid shiur* in the yeshiva; and the *niftar's* son, Harav Moshe, the *mittah* was taken to Har Hamenuchos, where Harav Weinbach was buried.

Harav Weinbach leaves behind the many books, pamphlets and articles in newspapers and magazines in English he authored on *hashkafah*, *halachah* and Jewish thought, including *On Wings of Prayer*, *meshalim* about *tefillah*; *Who Wants to Live*, containing 101 *meshalim* of the Chofetz Chaim; *Turnabout: the Purim Story on Megillas Esther*; *The Essential Malbim*; *127 Insights Into Megillas Esther*; the *Weekly Daf*, with insights and lessons on *Daf Hayomi*; *Give Us Life*; *Love of the Land*; *TalmuDigest* on *Gemara*; *The Magic Elixir*; and many more.

Harav Weinbach is survived by his wife, Rebbetzin Sheindel Weinbach, *tbl*'c, who is also an author of books and heads the Yad Leyad *chessed* organization, which is centered in her home, as well as several other *chessed* organizations; children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and thousands of *talmidim* and *talmidei talmidim* who merited to see the light thanks to Harav Weinbach.

His sons are Harav Avraham, Harav Yechezkel, Harav Moshe, Harav Mordechai, and Harav Eliyahu, and his daughters are Mrs. Rachel Ehrentreu, Mrs. Hadassah Glaser, Mrs. Sara Nordheim, Mrs. Yehudis Deutsch, Mrs. Batsheva Hildesheimer and Mrs. Chani Stanietzky.

Yehi zichro baruch.

get an appreciation and a respect for Torah methodology and authority. They know whom to ask what they need to know."

He would explain that the *frum*-from-birth Jew is in a totally different situation from the *baal teshuvah*. Any exposure to *tumah* could be fatal, *chas v'shalom*, for those brought up in the *chareidi* greenhouse. Yet, as we see from *Bnei Yisrael* in Mitzrayim, those who spiritually survived the Egyptian melting pot of *tumah* were toughened and stronger in their *Yiddishkeit*.

"Similarly, the *baalei teshuvah* who endured the *tumah* and were able to elevate themselves and reach *kedushah* are much stronger than the

A Mentor to Multitudes

BY RABBI BINYOMIN
SCHONBLUM

Thousands upon thousands of members of the Ohr Somayach family have been thrown into mourning with the passing of our beloved *Rosh Yeshivah*, father and guide, Harav Chuna Menachem Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*. For more than 40 years, he cared for and nurtured his *talmidim* as if they were his own children, encouraging, motivating, teaching, guiding and loving each one like a father.

Although I only had the *zechus* of meeting the *Rosh Yeshivah* one time, on the Ohr Somayach Mentors Mission this past July, that one encounter gave me a small glimpse into the greatness of Harav Weinbach.

Before leaving for Eretz Yisrael for the Mentors Mission, I was speaking to a *chashuve Rosh Yeshivah* here in America. When he heard that I was going to be spending time at Ohr Somayach, he told me about an episode involving himself and Harav Weinbach that happened more than 50 years ago.

As a boy, this *Rosh Yeshivah* had been learning in a Chassidische *mosad* in Williamsburg where Harav Weinbach was on the staff. Although Harav Weinbach wasn't his *rebbe*, Harav Weinbach was so in tune to the needs of all the *talmidim* that he sensed that this *talmid* would do much better in a Litvishe yeshivah. Unbeknownst to the young man at the time, Harav Weinbach spent a great deal of time convincing the father to send his son to a different yeshivah.

The end result was that the father sent his son to Yeshiva Gedolah of Philadelphia, where he went on to become an extremely *chashuve marbitz Torah* and *rebbe* to hundreds of *talmidim*.

I told this *Rosh Yeshivah* that I would send his regards to Harav Weinbach when I saw him. He told me to do so, but added that Harav Weinbach probably wouldn't remember him, as the incident had taken place more than 50 years ago and was not a major event.

When I saw Harav Weinbach at the opening banquet of the Mentors Mission this past July, he was already very weak but his face still shone; it was obvious that his zest for his lifelong mission was as alive as ever. He spoke passionately



Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, *zt"l*, visiting Yeshivas Ohr Somayach.



Harav Weinbach greeting Harav Aharon Leib Steinman in Yeshivas Ohr Somayach.

ly at the opening banquet and then made his way towards the exit.

I caught up to him in the hallway, introduced myself and then sent him regards from the *Rosh Yeshivah* in America. Immediately he became excited and recalled the incident as if it had just occurred the day before. Clearly, the care and concern that Harav Weinbach had for every *talmid* was not something that started when he had his own yeshivah; it was a part of his essence. Now that he has left us, we

are bereft, for we have lost his love and care for all Yidden.

This past Shabbos, my brother-in-law Reb Moshe Zakheim told me that he was involved in a complicated case of someone who was in the process of becoming a *baal teshuvah* and was married to a non-Jew. Obviously, there were many complex issues to be dealt with here. My brother-in-law was told to go to Harav Mendel Weinbach, as he was the *Posek* on these matters. Now that the *Rosh*

Yeshivah has left us, we are bereft, as we have lost his wisdom and advice.

A few months ago, I was speaking with Harav Nota Schiller, Harav Weinbach's great *shutaf* for close to 50 years. Harav Schiller had a letter in his pocket. I believe the contents of the letter provide a living testament to the *Rosh Yeshivah*, *zt"l*, and to his tremendous *hatzlachah* in bringing Yidden back to their roots, implanting in them Torah and

mitzvos to enable them to grow and blossom into *bnei Torah*. The letter reads as follows:

Lichvod Harav Weinbach, *shlita*, Harav Schiller, *shlita*, and the rest of my *rebbeim* at Ohr Somayach, *shlita*,

I am writing to try to express the appreciation and gratitude I feel concerning the recent *Siyum HaShas*. I was part of the *tzibbur* at the recent *Siyum HaShas* held at Binyanei Hauma. Harav Weinbach was one of the speakers and reminded me of the important and powerful *shmuessen* he used to give at the yeshivah. He mentioned the powerful *vort* about Rabi Akiva and the *daf* that he rode to shore on. I was in the crowd and I felt like calling out, "Harav Weinbach, do you know that I just finished the cycle?" My *simchah* then and now can't be expressed.

Similarly, my *hakaras hatov* to Ohr Somayach can't be truly expressed. The thought that I might never have known what *Daf Yomi* is, and instead I was *zocheh* to be among the *mesaymei haShas*, leaves me speechless. It also leaves me with the *chiyuv* of expressing my thanks to the *Roshei Yeshivah*.

I should add that the *hashkafah* and *chinuch* we received at Ohr Somayach that we have to become *lomdei Torah* and *talmidei chachamim* is the *yesod* upon which my personal *siyum haShas* has been built. I should also mention that Harav Weinbach's *sefer* was helpful and provided essential insights. More importantly, just picking up the *sefer* made me feel as if I was being told "*vayter in Shas.*" *Iy"H*, I hope to start again with greater *amkus* and *havanah*, as the yeshivah taught us to do.

May *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* give all the *Roshei Yeshivah* and all the Rabbanim continued *siyatta diShmaya* in *harbotzas haTorah*.

With thanks *me'umka d'liba*,
(Name withheld)

There are many more letters that have been written down on paper and sent to the *Rosh Yeshivah*, but there are thousands more that are forever forged on the hearts and ingrained in the minds of the *Rosh Yeshivah's* loving *talmidim*. May he be a *meilitz yosher* for his biological family, his spiritual family and all of *Klal Yisrael*. *U'macha Hashem Elokim dimah me'al kol panim b'vias Goel Tzedek bimheirah biyameinu*.



Harav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *zt"l* (L), with Harav Weinbach in Ohr Somayach.



Harav Weinbach (L) with Mentor Dr. Michael Bernstein and Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblum.