

Because It Hurts: Still Crying for Harav Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*

BY MORDECHAI SCHILLER

How do you measure the impact of one person?

And what if that person is a husband, a father, a grandfather, a neighbor, a friend... and also happened to be an eminent author and *Rosh Yeshivah*?

Do you keep a running total of *talmidim*? Like the incessantly ticking World Population Clock?

And let's not forget to factor in how many of those *talmidim* now have *talmidim* of their own. And that's not even counting the families — and extended families — of those *talmidim* and their *talmidim*.

And what do you do with the unknown quantity and quality of those *talmidim* getting their first introduction to Torah by that *Rosh Yeshivah* and his colleagues?

I'll leave the quantum mechanics of *talmidim* to others.

You can't paint a picture of Harav Mendel Weinbach by the numbers.

The Kavod Conundrum

Reb Mendel was indifferent to *kavod*. He embodied the attitude to *kavod* of the Kotzker Rebbe, *zt"l*. A chassid once asked the Kotzker why we say that if someone runs away from *kavod*, the *kavod* chases after him and he gets honored. That makes it sound like the honor is a reward for his humility. But what if someone really doesn't want *kavod*? What if he hates *kavod*? Why should the *kavod* chase after him and catch him? He would feel like that was a punishment!

The Kotzker said, "If someone hates *kavod* and runs away from it, that tells me the *kavod* means something to him. The right attitude to *kavod* should be that it's irrelevant. Getting honored, or getting slapped in the face, should all be the same. Both should leave no impression."

Harav Yitzchak Hutner, *zt"l*, once quipped about a great scholar, "He will never become a *talmid chacham*... because he's too busy learning."

While Harav Hutner was talking about the need to stop and digest one's learning, the image somehow reminded me of Reb Mendel's constant state of motion. He lived by Harav Yitzchak of Vorka's interpretation of the *passuk*: "*Eretz ocheles yoshveha* — a land that consumes its inhabitants." It means that Eretz Yisrael "eats up" people who are stuck in one place and don't grow.

Reb Mendel may be recognized as a *Gadol*, but whether he was or wasn't recognized, the *kavod* was irrelevant to him.

He was too busy learning, teaching and spreading Torah. He was too busy caring for each and every one of his *talmidim* — their learning, their success in *ruchniyus* and *gashmiyus* — to care what people thought of him.

He didn't stop while running the bases to check his standing on the scoreboard.

More Than a Partner

Maybe the real measure of a leader is how he inspires other leaders.

My brother, *ybl"c*, Harav Nota Schiller, learned in Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin and later went to Ner Israel Yeshivah in Baltimore, where he became a close *talmid* of Harav Yaakov Weinberg, *zt"l*. Harav Weinberg had also learned in Chaim Berlin. Once, my brother asked Harav Weinberg what he had gotten from Harav Hutner, *zt"l*. The answer came as a shock.

post offices used to sell. He filled every flap of the letter with advice, encouragement, and always with questions — specific questions about what I was doing and how I was doing.

The letters only stopped when I got married and moved back to Eretz Yisrael, and we spoke regularly. After a short time in a *kollel*, I was hired by the budding Yeshivas Ohr Somayach to run their office. The *bachurim* were learning in the *beis medrash* of Yeshivah Bais Yoseph Novardok on Shmuel Hanavi Street in Yerushalayim. The building had no available room for an office, so Reb Mendel arranged to share the P'eylim

discussions.

One day, Harav Nachman Bulman, *zt"l*, walked in, chuckling even more than he usually did. With perfect timing, he waited until his mischievous smile nailed everyone's attention. Then he said, "We think these boys are not so sophisticated because they never learned in yeshivah, but let me tell you something... I just spoke with a boy who is here for three weeks. And he told me this observation:

"From what I can see," the boy said, "if you want to understand something, you go to Rabbi Bulman. If you want an *eitzah*, you go to Rabbi [Nota] Schiller [*ybl"c*]. And if you want

the back cover of the magazine.

I came up with the headline "Recycle Your Mind!" Reb Mendel read it and shook his head. "You can't say that!"

"Why not?"

"Essentially, you're telling people their mind is garbage."

I saw his point, but still liked the concept, so I conducted an informal focus group. I went around the yeshivah and asked guys what they thought of the headline. Everyone liked it. No one was offended. Recycling had become cool.

Reb Mendel withdrew his opposition.

That was before my direct marketing days, so I never measured the results of that campaign, but I can tell you I am still close friends with three fellows who came to Ohr Somayach through *Shma Yisrael* magazine, and one of them came precisely in response to that ad. He told me that when he saw it, he said, "Yeah, that's what I have to do. I have to recycle my mind!"

Years later, Reb Mendel got the last word on a marketing question. I was working as an independent consultant and he asked me to come to the yeshivah to discuss a PR (public relations) campaign. I started telling him, "You need a road show..."

He stopped me and said, "I love these PR guys. You bring them in to promote your product, and they tell you you need a new product!"

Then he leaned in to my face and said, "Listen, Mordechai. This is a *yeshivah*! Get it?"

I got it.

Three Menachems

Reb Mendel wrote several columns for the *Jewish Press*, most under his own name, but he was also the ghostwriter for columns by two other Menachems: Rabbi Menachem Porush and Prime Minister Menachem Begin.

After Begin was elected Prime Minister, he was scheduled to visit Washington and meet with President Carter. There was one problem: The meeting was scheduled for the Nine Days — the mourning period before Tishah B'Av, when we are told to avoid court cases with non-Jews because of the bad *mazel* of those days.

Begin asked Rabbi Porush to ask Harav Shach whether this warning about the Nine Days applied to his having an official meeting with the U.S. President. Harav Shach answered that the warning about the *mazel* of the Nine Days only applies to an individual, not the community, and he said that Begin should go. But, "Before he speaks with the President, he should read through *Parashas Vayishlach*."

Begin thanked Rabbi Porush and told him, "Menachem, I want you to know I am not a *maamin be'emunah sheleimah*! I

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Harav Weinbach addressing the Ohr Somayach Mentors Mission.

"I got *everything* from him."

"How is that possible? If you got everything from Harav Hutner, how can it be that I never heard you quote him?"

"I don't need to quote him. Every time I give a *shur*; every time I speak with a *talmid*... I measure my words by one thing: What would Harav Hutner think? He shapes everything I do."

Trying to encapsulate four decades of partnership — working hand in hand as *Roshei Yeshivah* with Reb Mendel — my brother, *ybl"c*, told me, "We were more than partners or friends. For 41 years, we shared everything. Even when we weren't together, every success I had, I thought about how Reb Mendel would have *nachas*; every frustration I had, I thought about how Reb Mendel and I would find the humor in it, and be able to laugh at it together. Everything I did was by the light of Reb Mendel."

I Join the Team

I still have letters I got from Reb Mendel after he was my *rebbe* in a small yeshivah in Yerushalayim in 1967. He wrote in longhand on aerogrammes — those lightweight origami/fold-along-dotted-lines air letters

office in the Geula section, a short walk away.

Reb Mendel walked into the office as I was setting up, shook his head and went looking for a "*sponja*" squeegee stick and rag (the Israeli version of a mop, specially designed for washing stone floors). Seconds later, he was mopping the floor. I tried to grab the stick from him, but he was too wiry and fast for me.

"Reb Mendel, please... let me do that!"

"Get out of here! I have eight kids. You think I can't do this better than you can?"

At that time, my wife was expecting our first child. When my daughter was born, I called Reb Mendel to give him the news. He was delighted and wished me *mazel tov*. Then he added, in a dark, ominous tone that seemed to clash with his habitual impish smile:

"When the crunch comes... we're going to need numbers!"

Mopping the floor was vintage Reb Mendel. His *modus operandi* was thought in action.

Years later, as Ohr Somayach grew, I still shared office space, but with the *hanhalah*. By then, there was an administrative staff and I was running publications and public relations. As bat boy, I had a dugout seat during team

to get something done, you go to Rabbi Weinbach..."

As oversimplifications go, there was a lot to this one.

Reb Mendel was always on the move. Once he confided to me, "I can tell I'm getting old... I can still tell — from the sound of the way the ball hits the bat — which way the ball is going to go. But my legs don't take me there anymore."

Anything Worth Doing...

The preeminent pragmatist, Reb Mendel had no patience for perfectionists. Years before Nike sneakers would proclaim "Just Do It!" Reb Mendel threw this enigmatic epigram at me:

"Anything worth doing is worth doing lousy!"

This was too much. Even for a devoted devotee.

"What does that mean? That doesn't make sense. How can it possibly be worthwhile to do something lousy?" But I was no match for the master.

"If you wait to do something perfectly, you'll never do anything!"

Only once did I challenge Reb Mendel. One of my projects was editing the celebrated, but sadly short-lived magazine, *Shma Yisrael*. One assignment was to write an ad for Ohr Somayach for



Chaim Schvarcz - Kuvien Images

Rabbi Avram Reisman delivering a *hesped* in Yerushalayim marking the end of the *shivah* of Harav Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*.



Chaim Schvarcz - Kuvien Images

Rabbi Nota Schiller delivering a *hesped* in Yerushalayim marking the end of the *shivah* of Harav Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*.



Chaim Schvarcz - Kuvien Images

Rabbi Zev Leff delivering a *hesped* in Yerushalayim marking the end of the *shivah* of Harav Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*.

Memories From a Boyhood *Chaburah*

BY RABBI NISSON WOLPIN

Harav Chuna Menachem Mendel Weinbach, *zt"l*, was an extraordinary human being — both in terms of his achievements and his personal makeup of skills, intelligence and character, vision and insight, creativity and profound sense of mission. I knew him from after my arrival in Mesivta Torah Vodaath, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, where I joined my two older brothers in September 1948.

Reb Mendel, who was born in Poland in 1933, was brought up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania by his parents. He joined me in Torah Vodaath for Elul several weeks after I had arrived and we became the closest of friends for seven or eight years, remaining in contact over the decades. Thus, I was invited to share my impressions of those special years of closeness with *Hamodia* readers.

When I arrived in Torah Vodaath, I was not yet 16. I was placed in a class scheduled for promotion to second-year mesivta and assigned a *chavrusa*. When Mendel joined us a few weeks later, he was taken aback by the *chavrusa* situation. He approached Nosson Scherman, who was a year younger — a top student, he had been given a weaker *bachur* to learn with — and Mendel devised a Master Plan whereby many of us would be learning with *chavrusos* of

equal stature. The class was generally very excited and positively responsive, except for several boys who refused to cooperate: “Who are you to tell me who to learn with!” And so, the status quo remained.

I mention this as an example of his unusual sense of initiative and what became, for me, the beginning of a lifelong friendship with two of my closest friends.

There was never any doubt that he was invariably the first to grasp a new piece of *Gemara*, or that he was considered among the most capable in comprehending a *lomdishe shiur*, through *beis medrash*. In fact, he was skipped into the Torah Vodaath *beis medrash* by Harav Gedalia Schorr, *zt"l*, in mid-term — a rare occurrence in those days.

During his years in Torah Vodaath, he was exposed to much analytical *lomdus*, as well as to the weekly *shmuessen* of Hagaon Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*, drawing from Slabodka *mussar*, with his own unique perspective.

In addition, Hagaon Harav Gedalia Schorr, *zt"l*, taught *Chumash* with *Ramban*, plus much more every morning, gave original *shmuessen* at the yeshiva's *shalosh seudos*, and included Reb Mendel, along with Rabbi Nosson Scherman, Harav Meir Weinberg (a *Rosh Yeshiva* in Torah Vodaath), and the author of these lines, among a select *minyán*, in special half-hour-plus sessions on the *sefarim* of Harav

Tzadok Hakohen.

Reb Mendel was later selected by Harav Schorr to join Harav Simcha Wasserman, *zt"l*, in his venture in January 1953, to be part of the 10 *bachurim* who would accompany Harav Simcha to Los Angeles, where he planned to open the first *mesivta* high school west of the Mississippi.

Reb Simcha anticipated that the 10 accomplished young men would serve as a model of what the Los Angeles Mesivta would eventually produce. Reb Simcha noted to the author (who was also one of the 10) that on the one hand, Mendel was something of a nonconformist, but at the same time, he was admired by the prospective parent body of the *mesivta*.

Harav Simcha's Los Angeles venture was followed by a summer day camp with a younger group serving as counselors, and the high school *mesivta* opened that September. Reb Mendel and his companions return to the East Coast, with most of us entering Bais Medrash Elyon in Monsey, New York, in Elul.

Bais Medrash Elyon (BME), Torah Vodaath's advanced *beis medrash* and *kollel*, and Bais Medrash Govoha in Lakewood were, at that time, twin institutions. Hagaon Harav Reuven Grozovsky, *zt"l*, had been *Rosh Yeshiva* in BME as well as in Torah Vodaath, but was incapacitated by a stroke in 1952, and was succeeded by Harav Gedalia Schorr.

Still Crying

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am a *meimen be'eminoh shleimah*. (Putting a spin on the pronunciation, Begin switched from Hebrew to Yiddish — using his inflection to signal to Rabbi Porush that he wasn't merely “*dati*.” He identified as a *heimishe Yid*.)

The Talmid Chacham Behind the Curtain

Reb Mendel's indifference to *kavod* was more than a stance. He just wasn't interested. Maybe that is why so few people knew the breadth and depth of his

learning. One former *talmid* told me how the curtains parted one day, and Reb Mendel's *gadlus* in learning was revealed.

In the early days of the yeshiva, there were already serious *talmidei chachamim* on the faculty. Two, in particular, were held in awe by the *bachurim*. One day, the two Torah titans locked horns over an interpretation. As the battle raged, the *bachurim* — most of whom had never witnessed such an epic conflict of ideas — stood in a semicircle... at a safe distance.

Enter Reb Mendel. He had a phone message for one of the *bachurim* and strolled into the

beis medrash, oblivious to the battle. All at once, the two titans turned toward him... and each made his case.

Still looking for the boy, to deliver his message, Reb Mendel nonchalantly called back an answer over his shoulder.

Both of the titans stopped and said the Yiddish equivalent of, “Oh... So that's it!” and quietly went back to their seats.

The spectators dropped their collective jaws. Who was this Reb Mendel really? He never displayed his prodigious learning, always hiding it. “Pay no attention to that *talmid chacham* behind the curtain.” But his secret was out, and it

In our year, over 20 *bachurim* joined BME, many of them with an eye to the future as *yungeleit* in the BME *Kollel*, but that could not happen on anything approaching that scale. There was a ten-member ceiling on the *kollel* enrollment, except for one or two who had independent sources of support. As a result, when the time for marriage approached, we had to devise alternative modes of somehow continuing to be involved in learning, if even only part time. (Upon my engagement, I became supervisor of the dormitory in Torah Vodaath, leaving me afternoon hours for learning.)

Reb Mendel left BME several years later. One of his positions was to head the Alumni Organization of Torah Vodaath. He had an incredible power of persuasion, and enlisted fellow alumni members to undertake an unprecedented project: to create a Torah Vodaath *kollel* within the yeshiva's *beis medrash* in Brooklyn. No other yeshiva at that time had a formal *kollel* on its premises. Our *chaveirim* who were of age and ability, but would have been forced to wait several years for available space in BME, joined the Torah Vodaath *kollel*.

Another of Harav Mendel's special talents was mastery of written and spoken language. While still a *bachur*, he authored a regular column in the only English-language Orthodox weekly, *The Jewish Press*, under

the pen name Michael Vine. One of his columns commented on the historic breakthrough of America's successful launching of a space capsule rotating the earth — a full six years after the Soviet Union had put their Sputnik into space. He wrote of a *ben Torah* who had returned home after a day's work and greeted his children with a tantalizing question: “Guess what important event took place today?” The response: “Yankel (their ten-year-old brother) started learning *Gemara* today!”

The wise father left it at that, and Reb Mendel commented in his column: “To a Jewish family, a son embarking on a lifetime of learning *Gemara* is far more earth-shattering and noteworthy than launching a capsule in outer space.”

I must add that his command of language and compelling eloquence in both written and spoken media made deep impressions wherever he wrote and spoke. In fact, during my years (1970-2009) as editor of *The Jewish Observer*, Agudath Israel of America's monthly journal of thought and opinion, we proudly featured penetrating articles by Reb Mendel.

After marriage, he and his Rebbetzin, the former Shaindel Lamm, moved to Eretz Yisrael and he continued his growth in learning and taking creative initiatives until his last days, as is recorded in the pages of this issue.

was too late.

Because It Hurts

Reb Mendel often quoted the Brisker Rav, Harav Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik, who explained the *middah k'negged middah* for Pharaoh's three key advisors. Pharaoh had consulted them to ask about his plan to drown all male Jewish children.

Bilaam told Pharaoh, go for it. Kill them. For advocating the killing of Jewish children, Bilaam was killed.

Yisro ran away in protest. His descendants sat with the *Sanhedrin* in the Beis Hamikdash.

Iyov stayed silent rather than

protest and flee. He thought that Pharaoh's mind was made up and that any outcry would be an exercise in futility. Hashem meted out justice to Iyov with severe boils all over his body.

What did Iyov learn from his punishment? When a person suffers pain, he cries out, even though his outcry does not heal him. So, too, when a person sees murder being planned, he must cry out, because there is still the possibility that it just may help. And, even if not, he should cry out, not because it helps, but because it hurts.

We're still crying, Reb Mendel. Not because it helps, but because it hurts.