



The Long Short Road

How Rav Mendel Weinbach *ztz"l* led thousands on the journey of a lifetime

BY **Rabbi Yehuda Heimowitz**

PHOTOS *Kuvien Images, Mattis Goldberg, © Ohr Somayach Institutions*

Four decades ago, Rav Mendel Weinbach had a vision. Many young people were beginning to search for the spirituality missing from their lives, but would it be possible to actually open a yeshivah for newcomers to Judaism? With the founding of Ohr Somayach, that vision proved viable — and Rav Mendel became a veritable father to thousands of young men who passed through those portals

Mishpacha

Mishpacha
השבועון

Mishpacha

The premier weekly magazine for the Jewish Family.
[Click Here](#) to receive Mishpacha's free weekly newsletter.
[Click Here](#) here for subscription information.

A

s a society, we've grown so accustomed to the phenomenon of *baalei teshuvah* that it's hard to think of a world without the thousands upon thousands who have left a productive yet secular life behind and embarked on a path so foreign to them. But in the early 1960s, the trend was virtually unknown. Two centuries of Enlightenment had dealt a devastating blow to world Jewry, and the trend toward secularization seemed to be on the rise as the peace-and-love movement

spread through the world.

In 1966, however, a handful of men saw opportunity brewing in the form of a few Jewish college students who were thirsting for connection, for a chance to experience the light of Torah. Young, idealistic, and motivated, they established the first-ever *baal teshuvah* yeshivah. Although that yeshivah fell apart a year later due to funding difficulties, the key members of this group were undeterred.

In 1972, four visionaries — Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Rabbi Mendel Weinbach, Rabbi Nota Schiller, and Rabbi Yaakov Rosenberg — reestablished a yeshivah for *baalei teshuvah* under the name Shema Yisrael. Several years later, they decided that the name Shema Yisrael was too huge a concept to belong to just one institution, so they renamed their yeshivah Ohr Somayach, the name it has held for the four decades since. And in those four decades, two of the initial group continued to run and expand Ohr Somayach, building it into a worldwide movement: Rabbi Nota Schiller *shlita* and Rabbi Mendel Weinbach *ztz"l*, who returned his soul to his Maker last week.

Independent Thinker “Mendel was always an independent person,” says Rabbi Nosson Scherman, general editor at ArtScroll/Mesorah, who was one member of a close trio in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath that included Rabbi Weinbach and Rabbi Nisson Wolpin, editor of the *Jewish Observer*. “Independence is a trait that can be used for good or for bad. Mendel used it for the good. That independence is probably what led him to embark on a project that was so innovative: a yeshivah for people who didn't come from the typical background.

“He also always embraced challenge, and perhaps it was the challenge of building a new framework that hadn't existed before — and the independence to be able to build according to his vision — that called to him.”

Chona Menachem Mendel Weinbach was born in Galicia in September 1933. His family moved to the United States shortly thereafter, and he was raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Mendel was blessed with *joie de vivre*; people who knew him during different eras of his life all describe him as having a ready, quick smile. That was Reb Mendel, always smiling.

As a young teenager, he enrolled in Mesivta Torah Vodaath in New York, where he eventually studied under Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky and Rav Gedalia Schorr, whom he considered his primary *rebbe*.



Rabbi Weinbach had an uncanny ability to deliver a speech — often impromptu — that captivated newcomers and veterans alike



Rav Mendel was an innovator, but first and foremost, Ohr Somayach remained a *makom Torah*

It is no coincidence that the three young friends in Torah Vodaath would go on to become leading figures in the Torah writing world. “I was from Newark, Mendel was from Pittsburgh, and Nisson was from Seattle,” relates Rabbi Scherman. “Phone calls were expensive, and when we went home for nine weeks during the summer, we would correspond by mail. Today kids wouldn't be caught dead writing a letter, but back then it was the way we stayed in touch.

“We were young teenagers, and we tried to impress and outdo each other with our writing. That's how we learned how to write.”

Already in those years, Reb Mendel distinguished himself for his natural abilities. “He had a sparkling personality,” recalls Rabbi Scherman. “He was a big *baal kishron*, graced with a phenomenal memory — and he was able to zero in on what really mattered.”

Reb Mendel was eventually a member of the small group Rav Simcha Wasserman took with him to establish a yeshivah in Los Angeles. The experience, which was far from the rosy version many believe to be true, may have been a key episode in building Rabbi Weinbach's outlook on life. Los Angeles was a

hotbed of materialism, hardly a place to stake a Torah tent. The group arrived to find that the shul that was to house the yeshivah didn't have a proper *mechitzah*, and Rav Simcha had serious concerns about the kashrus of the food. But the experience of learning in such an environment undoubtedly bolstered Mendel's innate independence.

Upon returning from Los Angeles, he learned in Beis Medrash Elyon in Monsey under Rav Reuvain Grozovsky. At some point, he also learned *hilchos gittin* with Rav Moshe Feinstein.

Reb Mendel was an *askan* by very nature — a rare blend, as Rabbi Schiller puts it, of a true *talmid chacham* and an activist. Already as a *bochur*, he was called upon to establish a Torah Vodaath alumni organization, and in that role, he also founded the kollel in Torah Vodaath — one of a handful of kollelim in America in the 1950s. He was no less a *talmid chacham*, mastering large portions of Shas and *poskim* — some say he knew all of Shas — becoming an expert in halachah, and having the classic works of Jewish philosophy at his fingertips. At his *levayah*, Rabbi Dr. Yitzchok Breitowitz — a senior lecturer

in Ohr Somayach — noted that out of a deep love for Hashem and for every Jew, Rabbi Weinbach sacrificed his own growth in Torah to bring Hashem's word to the thousands of newcomers he would introduce to Yiddishkeit over the years.

In 1960 he married Shaindel Lamm, a Belgian war orphan who had been raised by her aunt and uncle in New York. As an extremely nonmaterialistic couple, they decided to move to Eretz Yisrael in 1963 — not a very common choice in those days — when the Mattersdorf neighborhood they settled in bordered on Jordanian territory. When Rabbi Scherman visited the Weinbachs in 1969, Rav Mendel told him how two years before, during the Six Day War, Jordanian tanks climbed the hill that Mattersdorf is nestled on, providentially stopping halfway up and turning back.

Kiruv wasn't Rabbi Weinbach's only stage in Torah education. Although he had been involved in the early effort to establish the first *baal teshuvah* yeshivah in 1966, when that yeshivah fell apart in 1967 because their funding was diverted to supporting Israel in its war effort, he served as a *rosh yeshivah* in the Radin yeshivah in Netanya. But he joined

Rabbi Noach Weinberg and Rabbi Yaakov Rosenberg *ztz"l* and *yblecht"l* Rabbi Nota Schiller when they established Shema Yisrael in 1972, embarking on what would be his life's mission: spreading Torah to the uninitiated.

What's in a Name? One thing that strikes a visitor walking into Ohr Somayach's Jerusalem campus is that no matter where they're holding, everyone seems to feel comfortable with the administration. Boys in yeshivah-style black pants and white shirts and recent arrivals in jeans and sweat-shirts both converse comfortably with rabbis 30 or 40 years their senior. And as I sit down with Rosh Yeshivah Rabbi Nota Schiller to glean insight into his partner of more than four decades, a man he described at the *levayah* as a "*gevorener bruder*" (roughly: a nonbiological brother), he reveals the depth behind the name of their landmark institution.

At the *levayah* for Rabbi Weinbach, Rabbi Schiller tearfully anticipated Rav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, also known as the "Ohr Somayach" for the title of his work on the Rambam, leading the group of *gedolim* who would greet Rabbi Weinbach when he ascended to Yeshivah shel Maalah. And the picture of the Ohr Somayach facing you as you enter the yeshivah's offices is yet another indication that the choice of the name is no mere coincidence.

In fact, Rabbi Schiller lists no less than four reasons why they chose the name. And in the process of sharing those reasons, he unveils much of the philosophy behind Yeshiva Ohr Somayach — and some key aspects of Rabbi Weinbach's personality.

The first reason actually has nothing to do with Rav Meir Simchah. "To secular people," Rav Schiller explains, "religious Judaism can seem restrictive, a list of do's and don'ts that can be very daunting.

"What we wanted to convey with the

"Rav Mendel's idea was that you have to get the student into Gemara study as quickly as possible"

name is that it's only restrictive if you're looking in from the outside. When you're on the inside, it's Ohr, light, and it's Somayach, it's the essence of happiness."

Change or Innovation? In his *hesped*, Rabbi Schiller hinted to a second reason. He recalled meeting Rabbi Weinbach for the first time shortly after Rav Aharon Kotler passed away. In his eulogy for Rav Aharon, the Satmar Rav *ztz"l* famously applied the words of the Midrash, "*L'hagid shvacho shel Aharon shelo shinah* — this teaches you the praise of Aharon..." to Rav Aharon Kotler, who managed to transplant the purity of Torah from Kletzk to America without changing it.

But why does the Midrash connect these words to the verse of "*Vayaas kein Aharon*," which is referring to kindling the Menorah in the Mishkan?

Rabbi Schiller's answer to this question providentially intersects with Reb Mendel's *petirah* on Chanukah. Many sources teach that the Menorah represents *Torah shebe'al peh* (the Oral law), and specifically, the ability to innovate, to be *mechadesh*.

Because the needs of each generation change, the leaders of Klal Yisrael have to be innovative. But innovation does not

mean change, or uprooting of halachah. Aharon HaKohein had to inject into the service of the Menorah the ability to be *mechadesh* — to innovate, without being *meshaneh*, changing things around.

Shinui, explains Rabbi Schiller, means to step outside of the *dalet amos* of halachah, to change things from the outside. *Chiddush* is to be innovative *within* the framework of halachah. "In choosing the name Ohr Somayach," explains Rabbi Schiller, "we wanted to make it clear that we were bringing *chiddush* without *shinui*. We chose to name it after a recent *gadol b'Yisrael* to show that we were continuing the tradition as passed down by *gedolei Yisrael*, not breaking from it."

But why the Ohr Somayach specifically? The third reason was partly a sensitivity, a desire to perpetuate the legacy of a *gadol* whose lineage was terminated. "The Ohr Somayach had only one daughter," adds Rabbi Schiller, "and she had no children. This was a way to commemorate him."

But there was also a deeper ideology connecting the yeshivah to Rav Meir Simchah. "The Ohr Somayach represented *chiddush* without *shinui*. Rav Chaim Kreiswirth told me that when the Russian leaders wanted to force *rabbanim* to learn Russian, some *gedolim* were dead set against it, deeming it a break from tradition. But Rav Meir Simchah held that they could learn Russian. Rav Kreiswirth felt that this is what Yeshivas Ohr Somayach represents. We may use innovation, but we use it for *kevod Shamayim*, just as Rav Meir Simchah determined that the Russian language could be used for *kevod Shamayim*."

The difference between *chiddush* and *shinui* was the guiding light in the many difficult decisions the *hanhalah* had to reach in establishing the yeshivah — most of all, in how they would connect newcomers to Judaism. Some felt that they would have better chances to succeed if they attracted newcomers through

The Consummate Communicator

Few are the great writers who can captivate an audience with the spoken word, and few are the dynamic speakers who can write cogently.

Rav Mendel Weinbach was able to move seamlessly between the two. He first became known for his writing, which he began to do publicly in the nascent *Jewish Press*, ghostwriting for several key figures and writing his own pieces under a variety of pseudonyms. Rabbi Scherman relates that in those early years, Rav Mendel wrote true Torah *hashkafah* pieces on controversial topics under the name Michael Vine.

Approximately 20 years ago, before most people even knew that the World Wide Web existed, Ohr Somayach was one of the first organizations to have a website. "We're trying to reach a clientele that might not come to us," explains Rabbi Eliezer Schapiro, "so we have to go to them."

The idea behind the website was to make Torah articles — on the *parshah*, the *Yamim Tovim*, etc. — available to the public. A year after Ohr Somayach launched the website, they started a magazine called *Ohrnet*. "Rabbi Weinbach, who was rooted in the yeshivah world, was so excited by the idea," recalls Rabbi Schapiro. "He would encourage us and push us to put out more and more. He himself began writing 'like a machine.' Each week he would write on Gemara, which eventually morphed into *TalmuDigest*, and he would write short pieces about Eretz Yisrael called 'Love of the Land.' He also encouraged other writers to contribute."

About five years ago, the JLL (Jewish Learning Library), Ohr Somayach's publishing arm, began to publish volumes of the material that was available online. The first volume was a compilation of Rabbi Weinbach's "Love of the Land" series, and it was joined by two volumes of his *TalmuDigest*. The JLL is hoping to publish additional volumes of each series posthumously, if they can find the sponsorships.

True to his overall belief that Gemara will draw people to Judaism, the concept of *TalmuDigest* was to make Gemara accessible to those who couldn't learn otherwise. In his introduction, Rabbi Weinbach explains his intentions in publishing the works:

TalmuDigest is an effort to bring the brilliance, beauty, and excitement of the Talmud to the widest range of Jews. For the serious Talmud student, it offers a new perspective of understanding and presenting the material he is studying.

For the Jew with limited time available for study, it provides easy access to Talmudic wisdom. For the relative newcomer to Torah study, it



serves as a tantalizing gateway to the incomparable wealth of intellect and guidance contained in the Talmud.

TalmuDigest is not intended to serve as a substitute for serious Talmud study but rather as an appetizer. By being introduced to the broad range of Jewish law and the profound insights of the Sages in every area of life, the reader will hopefully be inspired to join the proud ranks of those who have made Talmud study a valuable part of their lives.

But as comfortable as Rabbi Weinbach was with a pen in hand, he was equally comfortable at the microphone.

"You could ask him to speak for half an hour on two minutes notice," recalls Rav Aharon Feldman, "and he would deliver a perfectly polished speech. No one could know that he hadn't had time to prepare.

"On Tisha B'Av, it was impossible for *baalei teshuvah* to say *kinos* for hours. Instead, he would speak for two or three hours, explaining what we lost and why we're mourning. Some people became *frum* just from that speech on Tisha B'Av."

Rabbi Weinbach had the ability to develop a speech so that it could appeal to all audiences, newcomers and veterans alike. Even recent *talmidim* who had little personal interaction with him talk about his *shmuessen*, which he was still delivering until his illness sapped all of his strength over the last few months. But most astonishing is that Rabbi Weinbach, who did not deliver a regular *shiur* in the yeshivah, was able to serve as a "pinch-hitter," delivering an impromptu *shiur* in Gemara or any other area if one of the *rebbeim* couldn't be there — without any preparation whatsoever.



philosophy, but Rabbi Weinbach and Rabbi Schiller felt that the Torah itself should be the draw. The Ohr Somayach philosophy is that you have to teach a student to learn — and specifically, to get him to study Gemara — as quickly as possible, because that would draw him to Judaism.

“Even a critic of ours,” says Rav Schiller, “once wrote that anyone who tries to establish a *baal teshuvah* yeshivah in the future will have Ohr Somayach to thank for setting the standard on how to build a framework that takes a newcomer from naught to full literacy.”

Rabbi Weinbach once told Rabbi Scherman that a bright, intellectual fellow once came to him to discuss the existence of G-d. Reb Mendel refused to engage in debate. “I don’t care whether you believe in G-d,” I told him, “as long as you keep the *sedarim* [study sessions in yeshivah].”

“His philosophy,” explained Rabbi Dr. Breittowitz in his *hesped*, “was that *Hamaor shebo machziro l’mutav* — the light of the Torah will bring a person back.”

“It takes a very long time to make someone literate enough to learn Gemara,” admits Rabbi Schiller, “even though they often have *siyata d’Shmaya* and *kefitzas haderech*. There are much faster ways to make people religious, and we’ve been told that we could reach many more people if we didn’t insist on making each one literate and able to learn from the texts.”

Nevertheless, Rabbi Weinbach and Rabbi Schiller stuck to their approach, using each other as a support system. “It helps when you have a *chavrusa* in this *sugya*,” says Rabbi Schiller.

But it wasn’t only the methodology of actually teaching Torah that became a sticking point; even the identity of the institution was fiercely rooted in ideology.

Rabbi Schiller once visited Rav Shach after someone tried to convince the *roshei yeshivah* to engage in a certain activity that they felt might not be becoming for Ohr Somayach, but one that the petitioner felt would draw many more students. Initially, Rav Shach told Rav Schiller to pose the question to a *rav* in Yerushalayim. But when Rav Schiller persisted, saying that he wasn’t willing to do something that “*ein daas chachomim nocha heimenu* (the wise men of the generation are uncomfortable with),” Rav Shach replied, “I’m not telling you whether it’s *assur* or *mutar*. But I will tell you that Ohr Somayach is a *makom Torah*, and a *makom Torah* doesn’t do such a thing.”

Rav Shach then added a *brachah* that Ohr Somayach wouldn’t suffer from a lack of students by insisting on maintaining its identity as a true *makom Torah*.

It’s All About Caring On another occasion, Rav Shach told him that a person once came to visit the Ohr Somayach during the week, and he found the *rav*

and his wife celebrating with a younger couple. What was the cause for the celebration? It seems that this couple had some trouble in their marriage, and they had come to Rav Meir Simchah to arrange a *get* (divorce). The Ohr Somayach had worked with them for a few months, and they were able to put the marriage back on track. When the husband told him this, the Ohr Somayach immediately summoned his wife into the room, saying, “Rebbetzin, there’s a new *chassan* and *kallah* here, we have to gladden them!”

“Rav Meir Simchah was extremely concerned for each individual,” explains Rabbi Schiller. “So this is a fourth message we wanted to convey: this yeshivah is about caring for the individual.”

“I always say to the fellows here that the world at large emphasizes not losing the forest for the trees, that you can’t lose sight of the big picture. If you look at political figures in the world, they’re willing to trample the individual in order to climb the rungs to power so they can control the larger picture.”

“*Gedolei Yisrael* are the opposite. We believe that you can’t lose the trees — the *adam eitz hasadeh* — for the forest. Rav Meir Simchah specifically exemplified this principle. On one hand, he was one of the leaders of Klal Yisrael of his time. There was a woman in Dvinsk who couldn’t read Russian, and when her sister from Moscow sent her letters

Once on Friday

Friday mornings are usually sacred for me. Living on the rather frenetic, Israeli Sunday-Thursday workweek, I always labored to pack my Friday mornings with the *chavrusas* I didn’t have time for during the week, and I wouldn’t push them off for anything.

Except for Rabbi Mendel Weinbach.

When he said the best time for him to meet was Friday morning at 11 a.m., I rearranged my learning schedule accordingly and gladly gave up a portion of my day off. After all, interviewing a Torah scholar is Torah too.

We sat with our publisher, Eli Paley, and editor-in-chief, Rabbi Moshe Grylak, in our old and somewhat cramped offices in Givat Shaul. I had never met Rabbi Weinbach in person, but was well aware of his sterling reputation as Ohr Somayach’s *rosh yeshivah*, and his experience in the world of *frum* journalism.

Our meeting took place exactly one year after the appearance of the inaugural edition of *Mishpacha*’s English-language publication. In our first year, we consulted with the *vaad ruchani* of our Hebrew publication when *sh’eilos* arose; however, our circulation was zooming and we realized the need for a rabbinical board whose mother’s milk was Torah and mother’s tongue was English.

One purpose of this Friday meeting was to offer that position to Rabbi Weinbach. He accepted and served for a short while, helping us through our early growing pains, until the current board was created and started functioning regularly.

As a seasoned journalist myself, but a relative newcomer to the chareidi variety, I was quite interested in any advice Rav Mendel could offer about merging the two worlds. What struck me about him was that everything he said, even when “talking *shtark*,” was said with a smile. His trademark *darchei noam* filled the room.

I asked Rabbi Weinbach to craft a mission statement for *Mishpacha*.

“The mission statement for *Mishpacha* should be to report the news you feel is important that doesn’t find sufficient coverage in the daily newspapers. It should raise issues that need discussion within the chareidi community as long as the content of it is approved by the rabbinical censorship board that the magazine has in place. You must stay within the guidelines of *gedolei Torah* and at the same time provide interesting material.”

While advising us to avoid controversy for the sake of controversy, he assured us that readers would appreciate us taking up the burning issues of the day constructively: “As long as you are not slandering or smearing anyone or taking issue with the position of the *gedolim*, you should get credit for the fact that you write that there are flaws or problems in our community. We have flaws in our community. No one is perfect.”

His journalistic experience proved to him that when he brought up issues it stimulated suggestions for improvement: “It’s a fact that there are certain *askanim* who have risen out of oblivion only because an issue was written about,” he said. “That, by the way, is the major difference between the chareidi and the secular press. The secular press has one intention in mind and that’s how to get the most people to buy their publication and how to entertain them in the worst possible way. The purpose of chareidi journalism is what can be done and what has to be done to improve communal life.”

At the conclusion of our interview, Rabbi Weinbach posed the “standard” question asked by subjects we profile: “Can I review your article for accuracy before it goes to print?”

Coming from the world of mainstream journalism, that request always rubbed against my professional grain, yet when a *gadol* asks it, there’s no saying no.

I took his question as an opportunity to ask one more of mine: “What guideline can you give me for when to accede to such a request?”

His answer was thoughtful and direct: “Whenever you’re interested in an ongoing relationship with that source.”

—Binyamin Rose

in Russian, she would bring them to the Ohr Somayach to read her the letters.”

This utter concern for each individual was exemplified by Rabbi Weinbach. “Rav Mendel would make decisions based on the needs of the individual even when it came at the expense of the institution,” recalls Rabbi Schiller.

But Reb Mendel’s concern for each *talmid* was most noticeable in the amount of time he would give to individuals who sought his guidance.

Rabbi Tzvi Wainstein, who began to learn in Ohr Somayach in 1979 and has now served as a *mashgiach* in the yeshivah for 15 years, says that there was no such thing as Rabbi Weinbach not having time for someone; even the idea of *talmidim* setting up appointments was foreign to him.

Reb Mendel’s door was open to any student who wanted to discuss something with him, and his phone would ring at all times of the day or night with people seeking his counsel. Rabbi Scherman recalls Rabbi Weinbach telling him that when you deal with *baalei teshuvah*, you owe it to them to be available 24 hours a day. “They feel that they broke with their family, their past, and sometimes their career opportunity, for you, so you owe it to them to be there for them. If you’re not there for them, they feel that you’re betraying them.”

“I was once visiting Eretz Yisrael,” adds Rabbi Scherman, “and Rav Mendel asked me to join him for lunch in Ohr Somayach. *Talmidim* were walking in and out to ask him questions throughout the meal. That was the culture he had developed there.”

Rabbi Eliezer Schapiro, who ran the JLL (Jewish Lending Library; see sidebar) and other Ohr Somayach initiatives, recalls instances in which he was sitting in a meeting with Rabbi Weinbach when a *talmid* walked in to discuss something. Rabbi Weinbach would excuse himself to discuss the matter, and then return to the meeting.

“You could go discuss anything with him,” recalls Rabbi Wainstein, “whether it was halachah, *hashkafah*, or if you needed an *eitzah*, and he could answer you with



There might have been faster ways to make people religious, but Rav Mendel believed that Torah learning would speak for itself



“Rav Mendel had *chazon*: He had vision for what could still be accomplished, but he always took responsibility for what he had already undertaken”

— Rabbi Nota Schiller

absolute clarity. His answer would be thought out, and it would always be true Torah *hashkafah*, based on a Chazal or on a *mesorah* from one of his *rebbeim*.”

It’s no surprise, then, that many a *baal teshuvah* who came through the Ohr Somayach system viewed Rabbi Weinbach as a fatherly or grandfatherly figure in their lives, and continued to consult with him regularly decades after they had moved on from the Ohr Somayach system.

Although this image of Rabbi Weinbach seems to contradict his stalwart commitment to every letter of halachah and *hashkafah*, Rabbi Schiller says that this actually defined his *gadlus*. “Generally, a person is either a softy, or he’s tough. With Rav Mendel, as

steely as he could be when it came to a decision that involved halachah or *hashkafah*, he could spend hours upon hours dealing with the problems of an individual.

“He was on the board of a large Bais Yaakov high school in Yerushalayim, for instance, and he would sometimes invest hours to try to get one girl into the school.”

Time for It All Throughout his life, Rav Mendel was involved in public initiatives. “He knew that he had *kochos hanefesh* to succeed in many efforts,” explains Rabbi Schiller, “and he felt that that gave him the responsibility to get involved. But his ironclad rule was that the umbilical cord could never stretch far from the

beis medrash. Everything had to be connected to Torah.”

“He never shirked a responsibility,” says Rav Aharon Feldman, *rosh yeshivah* of Ner Israel in Baltimore, who taught in Ohr Somayach during its first decades. “If there was anything he could do — whether it was to speak, be involved in a public effort, or to sit on a board — he would do it.”

He was an *ish emes* who would not move an iota off of true Torah *hashkafah*, even if his position was not popular. “He was a person with very strong principles,” says Rav Feldman. “He wouldn’t bend for profit or gain.”

Rav Mendel was involved in P’eilim’s battle against the Israeli government’s concerted effort to secularize new immigrants. In the

1980s, before Degel HaTorah was founded, he was at the forefront of an effort to begin a new chareidi political party. His involvement in these initiatives is even more surprising considering that *talmidei chachamim* describe him as a serious *masmid*.

“After the *levayah*,” relates Rabbi Schiller, “a *talmid chacham* from Mattersdorf told me that he was once sitting in a *beis medrash* learning, and he came across a difficulty. He approached Rav Mendel, who was learning in that shul, to ask his question. They discussed the difficulty for a while, and didn’t come to a clear conclusion. Four hours later, long after this *talmid chacham* went on to other things, Rav Mendel came to tell him that he found an answer. He had looked up the Rashba and Ritva, and kept searching until he came up with a conclusive approach. He just couldn’t move on until he had resolved it.”

With all of his public efforts, Rabbi Weinbach was also rooted in reality. “Do you know the difference between *chalom* and *chazon*?” asks Rabbi Schiller. “They’re both used to describe a dreamer, but *chalom* is used derogatorily (‘he’s *chaloming*’), and *chazon* is used in the positive. On a practical level, I think that the difference between *chalom* and *chazon* is whether you’re paying your electric bill while you’re tracing your dreams.

“Rav Mendel had *chazon*: He had vision for what could still be accomplished, but he always took responsibility for what he had already undertaken, even as he did more.”

The Nachas Rabbi Weinbach was stricken with cancer approximately five years ago. Through those years there were ups and downs, but whenever he could, Reb Mendel was in Ohr Somayach. Even in recent months, when he was extremely weak, he summoned all the *bochurim* whom he hadn’t met in groups of ten or twelve so he could get to know them. “You could tell that he had tremendous *nachas* from meeting us,” says Avraham Block, who has been in Ohr Somayach for less than two years, “and just from watching the *bochurim* learning in the yeshivah.”

Even in the throes of his illness, he

maintained as much of his schedule as possible. Rabbi Yehudah Samet, a neighbor of the Weinbachs in Mattersdorf and a *rebbe* in Ohr Somayach since nearly the beginning, relates that up until a few weeks before Reb Mendel’s passing, he continued to deliver his *dafyomi shiur* in Mattersdorf. Even when he grew so weak that he could no longer speak, he still came to listen to someone else deliver the *shiur*.

“He was preparing himself to go,” says Rabbi Samet, “and he went in a very glorious way, using his last *kochos* for *avodas Hashem*.”

As his condition deteriorated in the last days of his life, signs went up throughout Yerushalayim calling people to gather in Ohr Somayach on Tuesday, the 27th of Kislev, at 2 p.m. to recite Tehillim on his behalf. Unfortunately, those gathered came for his *levayah* instead. And while large crowds thronged through the streets of Yerushalayim to his *kevurah* on Har HaMenuchos, thousands of souls that he kindled around the world mourned his loss, in homes and in Ohr Somayach branches across the globe — all of which he helped create.

“Today,” says Rabbi Schiller, “the sun doesn’t set on Ohr Somayach. From Australia, to South Africa, to London, the US and Canada — we have branches around the world.”

But the loss is felt the strongest here on the Jerusalem campus of Ohr Somayach, where each nook and cranny is filled with the spirit of the *niftar*, and each *talmid* — from the multi-decade veterans to the newcomers — are struggling to come to terms with the fact that the Rosh Yeshivah is no longer here. And that crushing blow is felt most poignantly in the office of his *gevorener bruder*.

“Sometimes I would sit here in this office with Rav Mendel,” recalls Rabbi Schiller, “and I would say that I’m worried about my Olam HaBa, because this is Olam HaZeh. To see a guy who came in with short pants, long hair, and earrings and now he’s marrying off his grandchildren — isn’t that Olam HaZeh?”

For someone who gave thousands of Jews the keys to access their own eternity, it seems only fitting that he managed to taste its fruits while in this world. ●

אמת

אחרי הטרגדיה המדווחת —
האובדן של אב וארבעה ילדים קטנים,
והשארת אחריו אישה אלמנה וחסרי
בן, רבנו אוריאל שילר, רב ומנהיג
הישיבה הגדולה — רבנו הצדיק
היה עמוס בתורה, ורצה להקים
בית מדרש לזכרו של רבו הנשגב.



רב אוריאל שילר, רב
בית המדרש הגדול

“I wholeheartedly believe, with *emuna* *sleisimah*, that we will merit finding donors whose hearts cannot help but be touched by the enormous tragedy that has befallen us, and will help fund our efforts to build a Torah center. They will be blessed in accordance with the words of Shlomo HaMelech: “It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and those who support it are fortunate.”

Donations to the Etz Chaim Tesh Center — a spiritual center that will serve as a beacon of light to perpetuate heartfelt and pure faith — can be deposited directly into the account: Bank HaPoalim, Branch 544, Account no. 319516 Israel Postal Bank Account No. 8472447 or by telephone, from outside Israel: 972-8-651-7320; within Israel: 08-651-7320; amuta@etzchaim.org.il



LESTER GOLDSMITH ROOFING

718.253.3484

Prompt reliable service since 1923

Commercial & Residential Roofing

OSHER LEVOVITZ



The World Outside, the World Inside, and the Intersection Between

Rav Mendel Weinbach ztz"l: Personal Memories

As I was leaving Ohr Somayach after my most recent visit about a month ago, one of the veteran *rebbeim* mentioned to me that Rav Mendel Weinbach had been in the office that morning. I quickly ran back to the office hoping to catch a few minutes with Rav Mendel.

The last time I had seen him was a few months earlier, when he gave the opening address at the English-language Siyum HaShas. He was barely recognizable at the time, as a consequence of the treatments he was undergoing. But the voice was every bit as powerful and impassioned as I remembered from my days in Ohr Somayach 33 years ago.

Though we knew that Rav Mendel had been battling the dreaded disease for some years, it was evident that night, despite the power of his speech, that he was very sick. So it was with some urgency that I ran back to Ohr Somayach. But the secretary told me that Rav Mendel had left for the day. I made a note to call the next day, but never did.

How many reminders do we need to learn one of life's most important lessons? If you owe someone *hakaras hatov*, tell him, for you may not have another chance.

I do not claim to have been one of Rav Mendel's closest *talmidim*. Yet when my wife called with the news that he had passed away, I was astounded by the wealth of memories that rushed forward. In an odd way, my memories of Rav Mendel go back almost 60 years. He was best friends as a *bochur* in Torah Vodaath with two of my mentors, Rabbi Nisson Wolpin and Rabbi Nosson Scherman, and they often speak of him in those days with the smile of one savoring a particularly treasured memory.

The check marks in my Ramban on Chumash are taken from the *parshah* sheets that Rav Mendel prepared. No Chanukah ever passes without my repeating his insight (in a Tisha B'Av *drashah*) about Chanah's words to the youngest of her seven sons: When you get to Shamayim, tell our forefather Avraham, "You built one altar, and in the end you did not bring your son on the altar. But I built seven altars and brought seven sons."

"Is that all that Chanah could think about as she was about to lose her seventh son in one day — bragging rights on Avraham Avinu?" Rav Mendel wondered. In actuality, he explained, Chanah was singing Avraham Avinu's praises: Your *mesirus nefesh* at Akeidas Yitzchak left a permanent mark on Klal Yisrael's spiritual gene pool. Because of what you did then, a

simple Jewish woman living 2,000 years later was able to offer her seven sons in a single day.

His descriptions in a *drashah* of his own IDF service in a unit identifying the bodies of dead soldiers, and of life in the still-new Mattersdorf neighborhood on the Jordanian border in the 1967 War, still ring in my ear.

I did not fully appreciate Rav Mendel in my two years in Ohr Somayach. Nor could I have. My Torah learning was not at a level to begin to evaluate his mastery of Shas and *poskim*, though it was something I often heard about from my *rebbeim* at Ohr Somayach. He was, in a sense, the *rebbe* of the *rebbeim*. And until I first took on a public role as editor of the English *Yated Ne'eman* nearly a decade after leaving Ohr Somayach, I had no occasion to benefit from his unfailingly incisive analysis of the Torah community and its various subcultures.

In recent years, however, he was the person to whom I turned whenever I felt the need to address a potentially controversial subject. I would fax him my pieces, and receive his responses in a matter of minutes. If the piece passed muster with him, I knew I was on safe ground. If not, I knew that I'd better go back to the drawing board.

I do not think I have ever met another person to whom the term *geshikt* was more applicable. He did so many things well. With other excellent speakers, one can tell whether they have prepared. Not with Rav Mendel. He could be counted on for any occasion, and without any advanced notice, to have the perfect *dvar Torah* ready. It was said of his beloved *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Gedalia Schorr, that he could shake pearls out of his sleeve. The same could be said for Rav Mendel.

And he wrote the same way. For decades, he wrote several columns a week for the *Jewish Press*, under various pseudonyms or on behalf of others. On more than one occasion, I watched him dash off ready-for-print material in a half an hour or less.

Because he did so many things so effortlessly, it was easy to miss just how talented he was. That was most true of his Torah learning. Everything was instantly at his fingertips. He would rattle off Torah sources, as easily as he did, *l'havdil*, the roster of the 1927 Yankees. (A storehouse of baseball trivia can be a valuable asset for the *rosh yeshivah* of a *baal teshuvah* yeshivah.)



As gifted as he was, I have never met anyone with less need to make others aware of those gifts. Most writers of my acquaintance would sooner write for free than take their name off a column. Not Rav Mendel.

His air was always casual and unassuming. He rode the buses and made his own way back and forth to the *simchahs* of his *talmidim*. Leaning far back in the chair in his office as he offered his wry observations, the twinkle of a smile on his lips, he seemed to resist being addressed in the third person.

That ability to leave his ego out of the picture made him a superb *baal eitzah*. He had a keen sense of the difference between the ideal and what could be realistically achieved in any given situation, and provided astute guidance on how to navigate an imperfect reality without losing sight of the ideal.

He was one of the few *Amerikaim* to fully integrate into the institutional life of Israeli chareidi society. His was recognized by all as a *klugeh Yid*, and he became a leading player in many communal initiatives outside of Ohr Somayach.

The same lack of ego made him the perfect partner. Sitting together with him and his partner in Ohr Somayach of more than 40 years, Rabbi Nota Schiller, in the latter's large office, one always sensed the easy rapport and mutual respect between the two. There was never the slightest hint of friction. They complemented one another perfectly.

Never was Rav Mendel's ability to take himself out of the calculation more evident than that horrible moment, around 20 years ago, when he was called to identify the body of his son Shimmy, who had been struck by a car while bicycling in the Jerusalem Forest. On his way to the hospital, Rav Mendel thought to himself: *Should I hope that it's not my son? But if it's not my son, it is someone else's son.*

How many of us would have had the question? Rav Mendel's lack of need to impress did not derive from a lack of sense of self. Just the opposite. He was so at ease with himself that he did not need the approval or admiration of others. Rav Simcha

PHOTO: OHR SOMAYACH INSTITUTION

Mishpacha
The premier weekly magazine for the Jewish Family.
[Click Here](#) to receive Mishpacha's free weekly newsletter.
[Click Here](#) here for subscription information.

Wasserman noted that he was an "individualist," who knew his own mind, during the *zman* that Rav Mendel and nine other Torah Vodaath *bochurim* spent in Los Angeles to help Rav Simcha start a yeshivah high school. (A photograph of that group, which was headed by Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, hung in Rav Mendel's office.)

Perhaps his independent streak made it possible for him to be one of the first to imagine a yeshivah for young adults with no learning experience and enabled him to be so comfortable with those from very different backgrounds.

My greatest debt to Rav Mendel can never be repaid. He founded and guided a yeshivah in which rank beginners like myself could learn Torah with some of the greatest scholars of our time — Rav Dov Schwartzman ztz"l, and *yblecht* Rav Moshe Shapira (both before my time), and Rav Aharon Feldman, and to be exposed to the rich tapestry of Torah thought by Rav Nachman Bulman ztz"l.

No less important was the constant message that our late start did not have to be an obstacle to reaching a high level in Torah learning. The highest *shiur* in the yeshivah today is given by a former *talmid*, and many former *talmidim* play prominent roles in Ohr Somayach — by virtue of their Torah learning, not their alumni status. And former Ohr Somayach *talmidim* occupy positions as rabbis and *maggidei shiur* around the world.

Rav Mendel was a dramatic but not emotional speaker. The one time I remember him being overcome by emotion was at the *levayah* of Rabbi Dovid Speyer ztz"l. Rabbi Speyer began his Torah learning in Ohr Somayach, before studying under Rabbi Abba Berman ztz"l for a decade. He then returned to "give back" as the *meshgiach* at Ohr Somayach for 17 years, during which time he forged intense bonds of love with hundreds of *talmidim*. After his passing, Rav Mendel could not speak of him without tears.

The evening after Rav Mendel's *levayah*, Rabbi Speyer's son was married — an emotional ending to the day for many Ohr Somayach *talmidim*, who were reminded of being twice orphaned in little more than a year.

I was outside of Jerusalem, relating the story of my journey to a group of secular Australian high school students, when the loudspeakers announcing Rav Mendel's *levayah* went around. But my sons in Jerusalem knew, without being told, to go to the *levayah*.

I'm pleased that they understood what they owed to Rav Mendel. And even more so that they feel no disconnect between their status as *talmidim* in Jerusalem's most famous yeshivos and their father's start in Ohr Somayach — rather, it is a point of pride for them.

Thank you, Rav Mendel, for everything you made possible. ❦