

DR. YITZCHOK LEVINE

# CORRESPONDENCE FROM A GADOL-IN-THE-MAKING

TWO LETTERS FROM RABBI MORDECHAI GIFTER, זצ"ל, WRITTEN IN HIS YOUTH

## INTRODUCTION

Teves 23/January 23 marks five years since the passing of the Telshe *Rosh Hayeshiva*, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter זצ"ל. As noted in an article published in these pages (Mar. '01): "He was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, as well as a bold and visionary leader and articulate spokesman for *Klal Yisroel* – primarily through Agudath Israel of America, which he served as a member of its *Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah* (Council of Torah Sages). Most of all, however, he made his mark as a dedicated *melamed Torah* to his *talmidim*... a teacher of Torah to generations of disciples."

What better tribute can there be to *gedolim* of the past than to learn vital lessons from their lives – how they faced the challenges of life, how they dealt with others, how they reacted to various situations. Rarely, however, do we have the opportunity to get a firsthand glimpse into the thinking of a *gadol* before he became recognized for his greatness. What were his thoughts? What did he feel was important for the Jews in the city in which he grew up? What were his early views on world movements?

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## BACKGROUND

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter was born in Portsmouth, Virginia, on 7 Cheshvan, 5677/November 3, 1916. His family moved to Baltimore in 1918, where he attended public school, and Talmud Torah in the afternoon.



(One has to keep in mind that in the twenties, thirties, and forties, many observant Jewish parents sent their children to public school. They received their Jewish education in a Talmud Torah or from a private *rebbe*. In most cities, there were no yeshivos, and even in places where there were, parents were often reluctant to send their children to "parochial schools.")

Rabbi Gifter's uncle, Rabbi Samuel L. (Yehudah Leib) Sar זצ"ל was the dean of the Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary (RIETS). He convinced Rabbi Gifter's father, Reb Yisroel, to send his son to high school at RIETS. "My father told me that he knew only one *blatt* of Gemara when he went to New York to be tested for admission," Reb Binyomin Gifter related. "However, he progressed so quickly that he was soon attending the *shiurim* of Rabbi Moshe Halevi Soloveitchik,"<sup>1</sup> whom he regarded "as his mentor, chiefly in the foundations of *derech halimud*."<sup>2</sup>

Upon completion of high school in 1932, Rabbi Gifter was encouraged by Rabbi Sar, who had learned in Telz, to go to Europe to study. Mr. Morris (Yoseif Moshe Halevi) Siegel זצ"ל, of Baltimore, also urged him to go to Europe to study Torah. Rabbi Avigdor Miller זצ"ל likewise had a part in Rabbi Gifter's going to Telz. Rabbi Miller told me, "I remember sitting on the curb in Baltimore with Rabbi Gifter. I told him to go to Europe to learn, and he listened!"<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Gifter related how his father cashed in an insurance policy to pay for his passage.<sup>4</sup> "Throughout his life, he (Rabbi Gifter) frequently referred to his father's love of Torah and outstanding character traits, especially noting his integrity."<sup>5</sup>

1 Interview with Rabbi Binyomin Gifter on June 22, 2005.

2 "HaRav Mordechai Gifter זצ"ל," S. Bruchi, *Dei'ah Ve Dibur*, B. Kahn, and *Yated Ne'eman* Staff, 29 Teves 5761 - January 24, 2001 <http://chareidi.shemayisrael.com/archives5761/voera/argifter.htm>

3 Private conversation with Rabbi Avigdor Miller, January 2001.

4 Interview with Rabbi Binyomin Gifter cited in fn. 1.

5 "HaRav Mordechai Gifter זצ"ל" cited in fn. 2

THE LETTERS

While studying in Telz, Rabbi Gifter wrote<sup>6</sup> from time to time to Mr. Siegel, with whom he was very close. Morris Siegel was born in Baltimore in 1902, the fifth of eight children. His parents had come to Baltimore in the late 1800s from Ponevezh. Mr. Siegel was one of a small group of young people who, in 1918, formed Adath Bnai Yisroel, a group that was committed to *shemiras Shabbos*, quite uncommon in those days amongst young people. In fact, for much of his life, Mr. Siegel ran Shabbos groups for youngsters, which encouraged them – even those from non-observant homes – to become *shomrei Shabbos*. Young Mordechai Gifter was also influenced by his participation in these gatherings, and he and Mr. Siegel remained friends throughout his life. Mr. Siegel was *niftar* in 5749/1989.

Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Siegel, a son of Mr. Siegel, was kind enough to share with me a letter that Rabbi Aharon Feldman, presently *Rosh Hayeshiva* of Ner Yisroel, wrote to him a month after Mr. Siegel's passing. He writes, "Your father, as you well know, was one of the *asara rishonim* ("first ten") of everything that was *Yiddishkeit* in Baltimore. For me personally, he was a powerful example – an American I could identify with who was *frum*, consistent in his *yiras Shamayim*, so thoroughly *erlich* and a *mekadesh shem Shamayim* just by being what he was."

THE LETTER OF APRIL 1935

Reading Rabbi Gifter's letters to Mr. Siegel, one cannot help but be impressed by the mature views that he expresses. Rabbi Gifter was eigh-

6 These letters are reproduced exactly as written. As a result, the first letter is signed "Max Gifter." This letter also refers to Rabbis Yehudah Davis and Avigdor Miller by their English names. The reader may find this surprising, given the almost universal practice within the Chareidi world today of using Hebrew names. It should be kept in mind, however, that in the thirties, when these letters were written, the common practice in America was to use "English names."

teen years old when he wrote the following (we quote from it in part):

April 7, '35

Dear Mr. Siegel,

*It's quite a time since I've left America and haven't once written to you, although we were the best of friends.... Time is precious in the Yeshiva, far more than in the business world, where it is said that "time is money."*

*During the year and a half which I've spent in Telz studying our holy Torah, I've progressed quite a bit ב. The spiritual enjoyment to be had from study of the Torah is beyond all description. It is only to be felt, and that, only for one who studies in the yeshiva of Telz. At the present time, Telzer Yeshiva is the greatest in the world. ... One may think otherwise, but I am thoroughly convinced as to the truth of the statement. You may think that this is due to favoritism, because I am a student in the Telzer Yeshiva. This is, however, not true. You may rely on me in this fact.*

*I have been informed by my parents that you have become a member of the Brotherhood of the Ohr Yisroel congregation. I hope that you will utilize your powers among the youth in drawing them nearer to traditional, one-hundred-percent Judaism.*

*Knowing that you are a dire antagonist of Zionism I would ask you to see to it that Zionist speakers are not permitted to speak for the Brotherhood. You may be surprised to read such a statement from me. You must well remember our bitter discussions on the subject: you – con, and I – pro. The time has arrived, however, when I must admit that you were right. It is (hard) to recognize this fact in America where Zionism<sup>7</sup> is not so active in Jewish life. However, in Lithuania and Poland, where Zionism is very active and takes a major part in Jewish life, one is able to see clearly the true face of Zionism. One sees that their sole purpose is to break away from all that is traditional; to destruct all that is holy. (Even the Mizrahi is not much*

7 Rabbi Gifter often characterized himself as "a true Zionist," based on his love for *Eretz Yisroel*. In these lines, he takes strong exception to the anti-Torah agenda of political Zionism.

*better than the rest of the rotten bunch. Only the fact that they are Jews prohibits one's saying yemach shemam. Someday, American Jews will also know this. And, I believe that that time is not far distant. I have been informed that the Agudas Yisroel movement is spreading slowly but surely in America. American Jews know very little about this movement. It was founded about forty years ago as a countermovement against Zionism by such great Jewish personalities as Reb Laizer Telzer ז"ל and Reb Chaim Brislan ז"ל. The Chofetz Chaim זצ"ל was one of its leaders. Now, the chief leader among the rabbis is the Gaon Reb Chaim Ozer of Wilno. The sole purpose of this movement is to make all Jews one-hundred-percent Shulchan Aruch Jews. There is much to write about this movement and the great headway that it is making at the present day, but time does not permit me to do so.*

*Does the Adath still have its Saturday night gatherings of the Chevra Shas? If so, what masechta are you now studying? Have you "covered much ground" since I've left? Has the Chevra gained additional members?*

*Teddy (Rabbi Yehudah) Davis is living very nicely in Slobodka. He studies in the Kovoner Kollel now, and we Americans stop in at his place whenever we have to be in Kovno. Victor (Rabbi Avigdor) Miller is also getting along finely. I had to be in Kovno the past week to have myself registered at the office of the American consul. Naturally, the *machnis orach* was Teddy. I ate and slept at his home. His wife is a very religious young woman. I happen to know her from New York. I used to come to her house to speak with her father. She was always very religious.*

*Well, let me know about all that I've asked about, and put in any additional news which I may have forgotten to ask about.*

Your friend,  
Max Gifter

*P.S. Regards to your wife and children, father-in-law and mother-in-law. You may enclose an answer to my letter together with my parents' letter.*

THE LETTER OF  
FEBRUARY 1937

Dear Mr. Siegel,

I have just received your letter and was indeed very happy to hear from you. I was really surprised at your receipt (sic) of the letter, but I know that you are continuously busy and can find no time to write. Your ol derech erez is quite a large one.

I always receive your regards through my father zol gezunt zein, and am indeed very thankful to you. You write quite a bit of interesting news in your letter.

I knew nothing at all about the fact that Peritzky had left Baltimore, but I am happy to hear that you will reorganize the Saturday night Talmud class. Rabbi (Shimon) Schwab once studied in Telz, but before I arrived here. From what I have heard about him, he is the only German Rabbi that has a Lithuanian look on Judaism and Torah. The Lithuanian "anshauung" is regarded as the real Torah-true "anshauung," so that's quite a lot said about him. I wish you the best of success in your Gemara class.

Happy to hear that you've bought a new home. May you dwell therein in the best of health and happiness.

My father wrote me of your Bible class, but I know that you could do nothing for our nation due to the fact that parents refuse to cooperate. The Talmud Torah system is a rotten thing for Baltimore. The parochial school should make an energetic campaign for new pupils who until now have studied in the Talmud Torahs. If we want to have good Jews in Baltimore, our only hope lies in the parochial school. There is much to write about Jewish education, but the time does not permit me to do so at present.

I knew nothing of your great misfortune in the loss of your mother-in-law. Hashem yenacheim....

Happy to hear that the Adath is continuing to work diligently for hachzakas Torah ushemiras Shabbos. Shemiras Shabbos is the basis of Judaism. Chazal

say that "Whoever violates the Sabbath is considered as if he worships idols."

I would like to write a bit lengthily about ... [various other matters], but I cannot spare the time.

I will sign off with a d'var Aggada in Yiddish.... [translated below].

"Hane'ehavim vehane'imim bechayeihem uvemosam lo nifradu – Those who love one another with a sweetness in their lifetime, not to be separated by death."

I explain the passuk as follows:

What is the test [that indicates] if

one's love for another is a true love? [It is o]ne that [determines whether that love] completely encompasses the entire person, rather than just one part. If the love is such that death cannot separate (the parties), then one sees that the friendship is a bond of two souls and not of two bodies. That is the true love and friendship. Not in writing one letter does a friendship matter, but rather when it is etched in the soul!

Extend my heartiest regards to all the members of your family. ☞