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MASTER BUILDER: RAV TEITZ AND THE ELIZABETH KEHILLA

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One cannot think of Yiddishkeit in Elizabeth, New Jersey, without at the same time recalling the community's longtime leader, Harav Mordechai Pinchas Teitz, zt"l. Rav Teitz served the Jews of Elizabeth for sixty years, building a dynamic Orthodox kehilla that provided for all the religious needs of a relatively small Jewish community.

Mordechai Pinchas Teitz was born on July 7, 1908 (8 Tammuz 5668). In 1924, after spending two years studying in the yeshiva in Ponevez, Lithuania, and some time with the Rogochover Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Rosen, he became a student at Yeshiva Knesses Yisroel, commonly referred to as Slabodka. At this time almost four hundred students were studying there. Slabodka, under the leadership of "der Alter," Rav Nosan Tzvi Finkel, produced many of the great Torah leaders of the past century.



Among those who studied in Slabodka and developed under the influence of Rav Finkel were Rabbis Aaron Kotler (Beth Medrash Govoha, Lakewood), Yaakov Kamenetsky (Yeshiva Torah Vodaath), Yaakov Ruderman (Yeshivas Ner Yisroel), Yechiel Weinberg (the Seridei Aish), Yitzchok Hutner (Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin), and Yaakov Moshe Lessin (Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon). An interesting thing to note about these men is that each was not only a Torah giant, but a unique individual as well. The Alter focused on the development of the natural gifts and personalities of his students. Certainly there was no "cookie cutter" approach in Slabodka that attempted to produce students who "fit a certain mold."

Arrival in America

In 1933 Rav Teitz was asked to accompany Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch on a fundraising trip to America on behalf of the Telz Yeshiva. He was chosen because at the age of 25 he had already earned the reputation of being a multi-talented individual and an excellent speaker. While in the United States, Rav Teitz visited many Jewish communities. In 1934 he met Basya Preil, whom he married in January 1935. Basya was the daughter of Elizabeth's previous rav, Rabbi Elazar Mayer Preil, who had passed away in 1933. Rav Preil had written in his will that the position of rav of Elizabeth should go to the man who married Basya, provided he was qualified. Mordechai Pinchas Teitz certainly fulfilled this requirement.< BR>

Rav Teitz and his new bride visited Europe shortly after their marriage so that she could meet his family. While there, Rav Teitz spoke at a number of gatherings. His speeches were always memorable. A friend of mine, Rabbi B., a student in the Telz Yeshiva from 1932 until 1939, still recalls a key point of the talk Rav Teitz gave in Telz in 1935 - some seventy years after he first heard the words spoken.

"I remember that Rav Teitz spoke in a movie theater in Telz," Rabbi B. told me. "The theater was packed. You have to realize that in Telz there were only one or two cars, perhaps three. Rav Teitz said that in America there were

many cars constantly moving this way and that way in the streets. 'What keeps the cars from crashing into each other?' he asked. 'At every intersection there is a traffic signal with red and green lights. When it is green, the cars can go, and when it is red, they must stop. The Torah is our traffic light! It tells when and where we can go and when and where we must stop! "

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Building a Kehilla

A man of great talent and energy, Rav Teitz set about the task of building the institutions of the Elizabeth Jewish community almost as soon as he and his wife returned from Europe. Dr. Blau writes on page 107 of her biography of her father.

In April 1935, at a meeting called for the new rabbi to present his plans, people were shocked when he announced, "I must leave Elizabeth." They expected an outline for the future, not a resignation speech. When they protested he explained, "A Jew is not permitted to live in a place that has no Mikvah; since we do not have one, I must move to a city that meets this primary requirement." One member sputtered, "It's a hillul Hashem, a desecration of God's name, to talk of such matters."

In the end he won his argument to build a mikvah. It took him three years to raise the \$3,000 required to purchase a building and renovate it, but Elizabeth finally had a mikvah of its own. In keeping with Rav Teitz's belief that Torah had to be presented to the younger American generation in as pleasing a manner as possible, the mikvah he built was a beautiful, modern facility that was always kept scrupulously clean.

The building of this mikvah was just a first step for Rav Teitz. In 1940 he opened an elementary yeshiva. In 1952 he opened a junior high school. In 1955 this junior high was extended to a high school for boys. In 1963 Rav Teitz opened the Bruria High School for Girls. All of these institutions were eventually housed in modern buildings that incorporated beauty as well as functionality. In addition, he built two modern synagogues, one in 1947 and the second in 1955. These would have been proud accomplishments for any community with five times the Jewish population of Elizabeth.

One must also add that Rav Teitz did not like mortgages, so he raised the money to pay off all of the mortgages on these buildings ahead of their due date.

National and World Efforts

Rav Teitz did not restrict his efforts to Elizabeth. From 1935 until 1995 he was involved in virtually every Orthodox Jewish issue of national and international importance. He was active in the Agudas HaRabbonim and Agudas Yisroel, as well as Torah U'Mesorah. He was always committed to Eretz Yisrael and did much to raise funds to support those who lived there. In the early 1960's he made his first of many trips to the USSR. He had a unique approach to helping oppressed Russian Jewry that not everyone appreciated at the time.

In 1953 he inaugurated his soon-to-be-famous Daf Hashovua radio program. The idea of teaching Torah on the radio was so revolutionary that some opposed it, claiming it was forbidden by halacha. With the backing of many of the great rabbonim of the day, however, he began to teach Gemara to thousands of listeners.

Some Personal Anecdotes

I mentioned above that Rav Teitz was a truly gifted speaker. As soon as he became the rav of Elizabeth he began to study English. He pointed out many times that it was crucial for a rabbi in America to speak the language of the country in order to communicate with the younger generation. With the assistance of Mrs. Teitz, who was born in America, it did not take long before he was fluent in English and delivering speeches in this language.

I used to go to the Jewish Educational Center (JEC) on Shabbos afternoons for Mincha and to hear Rav Teitz speak. These talks were always in Yiddish when I attended. His regal appearance and bearing, his inimitable style, his Torah knowledge, and his stories about Europe and its great rabbis all served to transport me to a world that I, an American-born man, had never experienced. I could have davened at the Bais Yitzchok shul across the street from where I lived. However, these talks were well worth the 10 or 15 minute walk, and their memory has lasted, as you can see, until today.

My eldest son was born in July 1970. I asked Rav Teitz to be the sandek at his bris, and he graciously agreed. The bris was on a Shabbos. We davened in the Bais Yitzchok shul and then walked across the street to my home for the bris. Since he and I needed our talleisim for the bris, we wore them as we made our way from the shul to my home. As we were walking outside with our talleisim clearly visible, Rav Teitz turned to me and said, "Thirty-five years ago, who would have believed that one could walk in the streets of Elizabeth wearing a tallis!"

The fact that we could do this in 1970 without any qualms was evidence of how far Rav Teitz had taken the Jewish community since he had first become its rav.

While Rav Teitz was involved in an unbelievable variety of activities, his primary commitment was to learning and teaching Torah. I still recall a discussion I had with him relating to some of the halachos of Succos. I asked a number of questions, and he responded, as he always did, patiently, clearly and precisely. At one point I asked what he must have considered to be a good question, because his entire face lit up with satisfaction, and he said, "Good, good!" Torah was always his first love.

Mr. Bieber

When I arrived in Elizabeth I found many well-educated, young Orthodox professionals living there. There was, however, one person who soon caught my attention, a gentleman by the name of Nochum Yehuda Bieber, z"l. "Mr. Bieber," as he was known to all in Elizabeth, was an elderly man who lived in a room in what had been known as the Remington Mansion. The Bruria High School for Girls was located in this mansion from 1963 until 1972.

Mr. Bieber once told me how he came to "live in a girls' school." He had retired and was estranged from his family. Since learning Torah was his main interest, he decided he would

move from New York to Lakewood. While traveling, he stopped in Elizabeth to daven Mincha. Rav Teitz spotted him immediately, and, after the davening, engaged him in conversation.

When it became apparent that Mr. Bieber had no definite place to go in Lakewood, Rav Teitz proposed that he stay in Elizabeth and live in a room in the Bruriah building rent-free. This way, Mr. Bieber would have a place to live at no cost, and there would be someone in the building at night and on weekends to make sure that unwelcome guests did not gain access to the building. It was, as they say, an offer too good for Mr. Bieber to refuse.

Not long after he moved in, Mr. Bieber found himself bombarded with invitations for Shabbos. After all, he turned out to be the perfect Shabbos guest. He gladly ate whatever he was served and interacted well with members of the host families no matter how young they were, despite his being well on in years. He knew when to listen and when to be "preoccupied." By the time I moved to Elizabeth, Mr. Bieber was in such demand that, in order to have him come as your Shabbos guest, you had to "reserve" him several weeks in advance.

Mr. Bieber's long term goal was to settle in Eretz Yisrael and live out his life there. He received a small monthly check from Social Security and did his best to save as much of it as possible. His life was a frugal one. I recall him making cheese from spoiled milk. He once proudly showed me how he prepared his tablecloth for Shabbos: He would wash it in the bathtub and let it dry. Then he would fold it neatly and put it between his mattress and box spring for a few days. The result was a neatly "pressed" tablecloth.

By 1971 Mr. Bieber had saved up enough money to move to Israel. When he applied for papers to become a permanent resident, he was turned down. The Israeli consulate would only grant him a tourist visa, out of fear that an old man like him would get sick and become a financial burden on the State. He was devastated when he told me what had happened. In some way or other av Teitz found out, and soon Mr. Bieber had the papers he so dearly wanted.

The next time I saw Rav Teitz, I thanked him for intervening on Mr. Bieber's behalf. He told me that the Israeli government had refused to grant Mr. Bieber the papers for permanent residency without a guarantee that, in the event Mr. Bieber became ill, someone would underwrite his medical expenses. In the end, Rav Teitz had to promise that the Elizabeth Jewish community would assume this financial obligation. In this way he enabled Mr. Bieber to fulfill his dream and settle in Israel. In 1973, shortly after Shavuot, Mr. Bieber passed away. My second son was born that Shavuot, and I named him after Mr. Bieber.

The Teitz Way

Shortly after I moved to Elizabeth, someone told me the following. "You have to understand; in Elizabeth there is the right way, the wrong way, and the Teitz way." I pointed out that something was either right or wrong. However, after living in Elizabeth for six months, I began to understand what this fellow meant.

There were times when some of the residents of Elizabeth were unhappy with things that Rav Teitz did and insisted upon. No one really likes a strong leader who is adamant about how things should be done. Nevertheless, Rav Teitz was always careful to make sure that nothing was done that would weaken the kehilla he had so painstakingly built.

Once, when someone was complaining about something that Rav Teitz had done, another fellow replied, "Think of what America would be like today if there had been one hundred Rabbi Teitzes in one hundred cities like Elizabeth."

Indeed, how many cities now devoid of any real Yiddishkeit would have developed into vibrant Torah communities had they had a Rabbi Teitz at the helm?

It certainly is something to think about, particularly at this time of year when we mark the yahrzeit of Rav Teitz, who passed away on the fourth of Teves, 5756, corresponding to the evening of December 26, 1995.

(Note: Much of the information for this article was found in the excellent biography of Rav Teitz, [Learn Torah, Love Torah, Live Torah \(Ktav\)](#), written by his daughter Dr. Rivkah Teitz Blau.)

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