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RAV AVIGDOR MILLER: HIS EARLY YEARS

Dr. Yitzchok Levine More Articles By Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Jul 21 2004

The third yahrzeit of HaRav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, occurred a few weeks ago. I had the privilege of knowing him as a talmid and on a personal level for more than 30 years, from about 1970 until his passing in 2001.

During his lifetime Rav Miller was one of the foremost proponents of Orthodoxy in the United States. He devoted his life to spreading Torah and mussar. He affected the lives of thousands through his famous Thursday evening hashkafa talks, his books, his years dealing with talmidim who attended Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, the classes he taught in Bais Yaakov, and the many Gemara shiurim he gave each week.

As someone once observed, "Most rabbonim take b'nai Torah and make ba'alei batim out of them. Rav Miller takes ba'alei batim and makes b'nai Torah out of them!" He was known for his steadfast adherence to his Torah principles - no matter what.

Avigdor Miller was born to Yisroel and Hoda Riva Miller in Baltimore, Maryland, on the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul, 5668 (August 29, 1908). There were no yeshivas in those days, so he attended public school and went to an afternoon Talmud Torah. Once he had completed the regular Talmud Torah classes, the school arranged for him to learn privately with an old Lubavitcher chassid.

Rav Miller recalled more than once that he spent two years studying Gemara with this teacher. There was only one problem: the Talmud Torah 'forgot' to pay the gentleman. Rav Miller never forgot that this rabbi continued to teach him without being paid and spoke about him with warmth and gratitude.

In 1925, after graduating high school at age 17, Rav Miller enrolled in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan, the only yeshiva in America at that time with a beis medrash. He was also an English major in Yeshiva College. While there, he studied under Rav Moshe Soleveitchik, zt"l.

In 1932, shortly before he was to graduate, Rabbi Miller met Rav Isaac Sher, rosh yeshiva of the Slabodka Yeshiva in Lithuania, who was visiting the United States to raise funds for the yeshiva. Hearing Rav Sher speak a number of times, Rav Miller was so impressed that he decided to leave Yeshiva College before he graduated and study in Slabodka. This was a turning point for him, because the years he spent learning there were to set the course for the

rest of his life.< BR> Interestingly enough, Rav Miller was not the only young man to return with Rav Sher and study in Slabodka. When Rav Sher was asked if his American fund-raising efforts (which had been undertaken during the Great Depression) were successful, he is purported to have replied, "I did not raise much money, but I did bring back a number of 'diamonds' with me."

Slabodka

Avigdor Miller arrived in Slabodka before Shavuot in 1932 and stayed there until 1938. He became known for his intense hasmoda, spending countless

hours studying in the bais medrash. While in the yeshiva he endured intense poverty; he once said that his pants had so many patches on them that he often wore his overcoat to cover them. In 1935 he married Etel Lesin, daughter of Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Lesin, zt"l. Rav Lesin, who had been a prize student of the Alter of Slabodka, was at that time serving as the rav of Neustadt-Zugind. He later served as mashgiach of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan. (An acquaintance of mine who was a student at YU while Rav Lesin was mashgiach described him as follows: "He was always immaculately dressed and looked regal. He never walked too fast, and he never walked too slowly. He never smiled too little, and he never smiled too much. Every move, every action, was thought out in the light of Torah and mussar.")

Rav Miller once told me how he was instrumental in helping Rav Elya Svei, rosh yeshiva of the Philadelphia Yeshiva, and his family come to the United States. Rav Svei's father was already

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in America, and he wanted his wife and family to join him. However, Mrs. Svei could not get the necessary papers needed to immigrate. She knew that Rav Miller was an American, and begged him to go to the American consul in Kovno (Slabodka is near Kovno) and make a plea on her behalf. He agreed reluctantly, sure that his efforts would be fruitless.

Given his precarious financial situation, Rav Miller did not have a decent suit to wear for his upcoming meeting with the consul. "So I borrowed a suit from the yeshiva, because the yeshiva had a few decent suits for the bochurim to use when they needed them," he told me. When he did get to meet the American consul, he discovered that he was also from Baltimore and that they had both attended the same high school, but at different times. Rav Miller told me, "He talked baseball with me for an hour or so. I really didn't know much about baseball, but I listened patiently. In the end he issued the necessary papers and that is how Rav Svei came to America."

Chelsea, Mass.

In 1938 the United States government advised all American citizens to leave Europe due to the increasing possibility of the outbreak of war. Rav Miller left with his wife and family and returned to Baltimore, where he began looking for a position as a rav. However, he refused to speak English when he went on interviews, despite the fact that he was American born and had almost completed an undergraduate degree in English literature at YU. Most shuls would not hire him because they wanted a rabbi who spoke the language of the younger generation. In addition, I am sure that he did not hide his steadfast commitment to Torah and his uncompromising approach to halacha. In 1939, after nine months of searching, he was appointed rav of the Agudas Achim shul - widely known as the Litvische shul - on Walnut Street in Chelsea, Mass.

Many people in Chelsea were involved in the rag business during the years that Rav Miller was there. In general, rags were not bought and sold on Saturday, which meant that it was relatively easy for one to be shomer Shabbos if he worked in this business. This meant that Chelsea had a disproportionately high number of shomerrei Shabbos when compared with other similarly sized cities in the U.S. A good number of these people davened in the Litvische shul. However, as Rav Miller pointed out to me during one of the times that we reminisced about Chelsea, "There were often 100 old men in shul on Shabbos and no young people."

Upon his arrival in Chelsea, Rav Miller announced that he would learn with any boy for free. A neighbor of mine, Dr. I., was one of those boys. He recalled that he went first to public high school, then to classes at the Boston Hebrew Teachers College, and on his way home he would go to Rav Miller's house to learn Gemara. Once he came in with a book written by a 'modern' writer of whom Rav Miller did not approve. "Don't put that book on the table with the Gemaras!" Rav Miller told him in no uncertain terms.

Dr. I. also remembered that when he once came to Rav Miller's house, Rav Miller was speaking with a guest. Rav Miller turned to the guest and said in Yiddish, "He can speak Yiddish!" He then turned to Dr. I. and said, "Speak Yiddish! Speak Yiddish!"

Rav Miller learned with a number of boys and was responsible for influencing some of them to go to New York and enroll in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. He knew the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yitzchok Hutner, zt"l, from the time they had both spent in Slabodka. He told me he would prepare the boys to say a d'var Torah based on something from the K'tzos HaChoshen. Once the boy was ready, he would send him to New York for an interview with Rav Hutner. These boys invariably were accepted into the yeshiva by Rav Hutner.

Rav Miller realized that many young people were not observant because they attended public school and were influenced by the non-Jews whom they encountered. Indeed, he would not send his oldest son to public school. Instead he engaged special tutors and rebbeim to teach his son. However, this was long before home-schooling was in vogue and recognized by the authorities. Every child was required to attend public school. To get around this requirement, Rav Miller got a politician whom he knew to introduce a special bill that exempted his son from attending public school.

Building a Day School

Rav Miller was well aware that the only antidote to the secularism that surrounded the Jews of Chelsea was to make sure that the children received a concentrated Jewish education in a Jewish environment. This meant starting a day school in Chelsea, and he undertook this with all the resources at his disposal. One has to realize that most Jewish parents in the 1940's did not think it was necessary to send their children to a day school. Indeed, since many of the parents were European born, they felt that the best course for their children was the quality secular education the public schools offered at that time. This was the path to integrating into the American milieu, becoming a professional, and being economically upward-bound. Unfortunately, it also was often the path to giving up religious observance.

Rav Miller met considerable opposition when he proposed opening a day school in Chelsea. He told me that some people said to him, "If you want a day school, then move to New York. This is not the place for a day school." There was also opposition from the supporters of the Chelsea Hebrew School. Many felt that the Jewish education the youngsters received there was sufficient. The community ended up being split between those who supported the idea of a day school and those who were opposed to it. There were some who secretly gave money to help found the day school, but only on condition that no one knew about it.

The feelings between the two groups were so strong that Rav Miller told me that on the day the building for the day school was purchased he had to 'hide out' in the home of a supporter. He felt that if the opposition would find him, they might force him to give back the deed! The end result was that a day school was founded in Chelsea, and it educated Jewish children for many years after Rav Miller left the city.

In 1944 Rav Miller received a call from Rav Yitzchok Hutner offering him the position of

mashgiach at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. Rav Miller would later quip, "I thought hard about the offer - for about thirty seconds - and then said yes!"

The truth is that Rav Miller already had decided he was going to leave Chelsea and move to New York. He was convinced that home-schooling was not sufficient for the proper education of his oldest son. What his son needed was a good yeshiva education, and this was not available to him in Chelsea, since he was too old for the new day school. As was typical of his steadfast adherence to his Torah principles 'no matter what,' Rav Miller had made the decision to leave Chelsea and move to New York despite the fact that he did not have a job there. Rav Hutner's offer came along just at the right time. Rav Miller was sure that this was 'no accident,' and he left Chelsea in 1944, much to the sadness of his many supporters.

Rav Miller always remembered his years in Chelsea with fondness and nostalgia. Once he found out that I was a 'Chelsea boy,' he would at times reminisce with me about the years he lived there. 'I felt I was leaving the front lines in the battle for Yiddishkeit when I moved. But what could I do? I had to give my son a proper yeshiva education.'

My mother, a"h, who was born in Chelsea, once sent me a newspaper article about a shul in Chelsea that had been designated a historic site. I brought the article to Rav Miller. As he read it, he said enthusiastically, "That's my old shul! That's my old shul! Can I keep this?" I told him he certainly could, whereupon he carefully folded the article and put it in his pocket.

When I was a young boy my family lived on Walnut Street in Chelsea. Rav Miller also lived on Walnut Street for part of the time that he resided in Chelsea. However, I was only four years old when Rav Miller left Chelsea, and therefore never met him while he was there. Years later, after I had begun attending Rav Miller's shiurim, I asked my mother if she knew Rav Miller. She replied, "Oh, yes. He was rav of the Litvische shul, and we davened in the Russische shul. We had nothing to do with them!" This was indeed unfortunate given all that Rav Miller had to offer to every Jew who resided in Chelsea while he was a rav there.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Editor's Note: On Wednesday, May 5, at 8:15 p.m., Professor Levine will be giving a lecture entitled -An American Revolutionary: Rav Avigdor Miller, ZT"L, His Life and Times at Congregation Talmud Torah of Flatbush, 1305 Coney Island Avenue (between Avenues I and J) in Brooklyn. The lecture is open to the public and is provided by the Talmud Torah as a free public service to the community. For further information, please call 718-377-2528.

While the above essay recounts stories of Rav Miller from his birth until he left Chelsea, Mass., to become mashgiach of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, Dr. Levine's lecture will deal with all of Rav Miller's life.

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