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RAV AVIGDOR MILLER: HIS YEARS AS MASHGIACH

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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Editor's Note: In a front-page essay in the April 30 issue of The Jewish Press, Dr. Levine traced the life of Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, from his youth in Baltimore until 1944 when he gave up his position as a rav in Chelsea, Mass., to become the mashgiach of Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn.

What follows below should be read in light of what Orthodoxy in the United States was during the forties, fifties and sixties. Orthodoxy certainly looked at least 'externally' different than it does today. In general, Orthodox Jews dressed in a fashion similar to their gentile neighbors. Most Orthodox men were clean shaven.

Rabbi Motel S., who came as a boy from a chassidic European environment to the United States before World War II, told me that when he went to Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin for an entrance interview, he was shocked that Rav Hutner, zt"l, the rosh yeshiva, did not have a beard and wore a 'short' jacket. At that time the yeshiva apparently did not even have an entire Shas readily available, because Rav Hutner could not locate the masechta that Reb Motel had been learning in Europe. He tested him from memory.

One rarely saw a man or a boy with a yarmulke in public. Caps and hats were the rule. Many women, even in what were considered 'right wing' circles, did not cover their hair except for the 'mandatory' hat that was worn to shul or at other public gatherings. Young men in beis medrash more often than not went to secular colleges a few evenings a week and ended up pursuing careers in the professions. Young unmarried men and women often interacted with each other socially, and most Orthodox people did not see anything wrong with this.

*Mrs. C., who was born in the United States in the 1920's, was raised in a strictly shomer Shabbos home. In 1945 she married a boy who learned in Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. Rav Miller attended her wedding, and she has a picture of Rav Miller dancing with her husband. (By the way, the choson is wearing a top hat and tuxedo in the picture, something that was not uncommon in those days.) After chatting for awhile about what Orthodox Jewish life was like during the thirties, forties and fifties, she commented, "It was a different world then." It most certainly was.
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(It should be kept in mind that none of this is being written to disparage these people. Indeed, those who remained loyal to Yiddishkeit during those years often did this with firm commitment and courage. Their dedication to Judaism should in no way be minimized.)

It was this milieu that Rav Avigdor Miller faced in 1944 when he moved to New York and assumed the position of mashgiach.

Rav Miller's background made him uniquely qualified to serve as a mashgiach and rav during

those years. He had been raised in the American Jewish environment of the first half of the 20th century and then studied in one of the finest yeshivas in Europe. These experiences gave him a special perspective. He dealt with American Jews during the last of the war years and the two decades that followed in a manner that was designed to do more than help them maintain their level of observance. This was never enough for him. He always personally strove for higher levels of commitment to Hashem and was able to inspire those who fell under his influence to do the same.

Rav Miller served as the mashgiach of the beis medrash from 1944 until 1965. For almost all of this time he lived in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. When he moved there, he began davening in the Young Israel of Rugby. In 1946 he became the rav of this shul. Rav Miller fulfilled his duties as mashgiach and his responsibilities as rav in his own unique way.

(Note: In my first article I incorrectly wrote that Rav Miller left Chelsea, Mass., to become the mashgiach of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. It has been pointed out to me that Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin was the name of an elementary school. The high school and beis

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medrash headed by Rav Hutner were called Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. The two institutions were, in fact, located in two different places. The name Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin is on the letterhead of the letter of recommendation referred to below that Rav Miller wrote for Rabbi K. in 1963.)

Being on Time

Rabbi N., who studied for many years in Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, recalled with admiration how Rav Miller ran the beis medrash with a strong hand. He was adamant that the boys be on time and not miss shiurim.

Rabbi N. related how as a student he arrived one morning at a bus stop on his way to yeshiva and found Rav Miller also waiting for the bus. They greeted each other and began to talk. The bus came along shortly thereafter; they boarded, sat next to each other and continued their discussions. They got off at their stop and headed to the yeshiva.

As they approached the door, Rabbi N. stepped back to allow Rav Miller to enter first. Rav Miller stepped ahead, turned around, faced Rabbi N. and took out his pocket watch. (I never saw Rav Miller wear a wrist watch. He invariably carried a pocket watch.) Looking at his watch, Rav Miller said, "You are late, go home!" Rabbi N. was astounded and replied, "Why didn't you tell me this when we met at the bus stop?" Rav Miller replied, "You were not late then!"

When boys in the yeshiva committed an infraction, Rav Miller imposed a monetary fine on them. For example, the boys were supposed to be in the beis medrash learning by no later than 9:30 each morning. Every day shortly before 9:30 Rav Miller would get up from his shtender, walk across the beis medrash, and position himself at the entrance. Each boy who was late was queried as to why he had not come on time. After hearing a bochur's excuse, Rav Miller would make an evaluation on the spot and often impose a fine. While the fine usually was not more than a quarter, its imposition made it clear to those who were tardy that they were expected to be at their shtenders learning each day by 9:30.

There were times when Rav Miller imposed steeper fines on the young men for more serious infractions. One fellow told me he missed a number of days of yeshiva because he had to study for his college finals. After he completed his exams he wanted to return to learning in the beis medrash. Rav Miller insisted that he pay a hefty fine before he permitted him to continue learning in the yeshiva. The young man had no choice but to sell some stock he owned to get the money required to pay the fine. He told me, "That stock really went up after I was forced to sell it. But, what could I do, I had to pay the fine. There was no other way to get back into the yeshiva."

I once asked Rabbi N. what Rav Miller did with the money he collected as fines from the boys. He replied that at the end of a z'man Rav Miller would take a boy who he felt was having a very negative influence on the yeshiva and say to him, "I will give you such and such a sum of money, if you promise me you will leave the yeshiva and never return!"

Relationship With Those in the Yeshiva

One has to keep in mind that Rav Miller was an extremely strong personality who never sugarcoated his words or hesitated to speak his mind. To him the truth was the overriding guideline, and if the truth offended someone, so be it. As a result, there were those associated with Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin who were not his supporters.

In fact, according to Moshe Aryeh F., a talmid at the Mesivtha during the fifties, some of these individuals gave him more than his share of grief. At one point Moshe Aryeh became very upset with how some people in the yeshiva were treating Rav Miller and asked him how he was able to deal with what he felt were affronts. Rav Miller replied, in his typically unique fashion, "Moshe Aryeh, where else could I spend my entire day sitting and learning and also get a paycheck once in a while?"

Although Rav Miller spoke his mind, he was always careful to deal with any problem that a bochur had in as discreet a manner as possible. Steve K., a Chaim Berlin talmid in the late fifties, told me that Rav Miller never directly called over a bochur whom he wanted to chastise. Instead, he would say to another bochur, "Ask so-and-so to come over here and see me." His goal was not to embarrass anyone in public if this could be avoided.

Steve also pointed out that Rav Miller had his own unique way of showing his disapproval of the actions of a talmid that he felt were inappropriate. One of the bochrin once came to the beis medrash dressed in jeans. As was his custom, Rav Miller asked another bochur to call this fellow over. The young man came over to him, and Rav Miller asked, "Did you park your horse near the yeshiva?" The boy, taken aback and not knowing what to say, replied, "No. I left him at home." Without losing a beat Rav Miller quipped, "Well, when you go home at lunch time to feed your horse, make sure that you change your pants!"

A Letter of Recommendation

Over the more than twenty years that Rav Miller was the mashgiach of the beis medrash of Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, he forged lifelong bonds with many of the yeshiva's students. Rabbi Sholom K. is one such person. Sholom studied in Chaim Berlin from 1960 to 1963. He came as a ninth grader, but since he was advanced in his learning, he studied in the beis medrash after his first year.

"I sat right in front of Rav Miller," he told me. "I knew that he liked me. One of the reasons may have been because I traveled every day from the Bronx to the yeshiva by subway. It took me about two hours, but I was almost always on time. This Rav Miller liked."

Sholom recalled that one day Rav Miller came over to him, put his hand on his shoulder and said, "K., do you have a dictionary?" Sholom was taken aback, but answered in the

affirmative. Later, when Rav Miller's first book, "Rejoice O Youth," appeared in 1962, Sholom understood that Rav Miller must have needed the dictionary to assist him with his writing.

Sholom completed his secular high school studies in three years. In 1963 he decided he wanted to go to Yeshiva University after his graduation, and he asked Rav Miller for a letter of recommendation. Now it was well-known that Rav Miller was not in favor of boys going to YU. However, he did not try to dissuade Sholom. He inquired as to who Sholom's rebbeim would be and then he said, "You will be all right there." Shortly thereafter Rav Miller wrote a letter of recommendation, which Sholom still has in his possession. (It's interesting to note that the heading on the stationery gives Rav Miller's title as "Dean of Men.")

Sholom studied at YU and received smicha there. He told me, "I encountered Rav Miller on Avenue J, not having seen him for about fifteen years. He remembered me right away and asked me about what I was doing."

At one point in my discussions about Rav Miller with Sholom, he said, "I really loved that man!" and paused, overcome with emotion. "It is hard to describe how I feel about him," he added.

True, it was hard for Sholom to describe his deep feelings for Rav Miller to me. However, the glow on his face when he expressed his love for Rav Miller said it all. This is the kind of devotion Rav Avigdor Miller elicited from talmidim whom he encountered at Mesivtha Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin during his years as mashgiach.

In this way Rav Miller helped prepare a generation of young men to function as observant Jews at a time when American Orthodoxy was still in its infant stages. Rav Miller helped lay the groundwork that enabled Orthodoxy to become the vibrant force it is today, and for that we all owe him a huge debt of gratitude.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

On May 5, Dr. Levine gave a lecture at Congregation Talmud Torah in Flatbush entitled "An American Revolutionary: The Life and Times of Rav Avigdor Miller". This talk may be heard at http://g2.stevens-tech.edu:7070/ramgen/llevine1/r_miller_5_05_04.rmj.

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