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## RAV AVIGDOR MILLER: THE LATER YEARS

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
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*Editor's Note: This is the third and concluding installment in a series of articles on the life of Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, the first of which appeared in the issue of April 30, the second on June 4.*

From 1946 to 1975 Rav Miller was the rav of the Young Israel of Rugby in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn. In 1975 the shul relocated to Ocean Parkway near Avenue R and was subsequently called Bais Yisroel Torah Center. Rav Miller served as the rav there until his passing in 2001.

In the nineteen-forties the Young Israel of Rugby was a shul similar to most Young Israel synagogues of the time. Its members represented a spectrum of observance from shomrei Shabbos to those who were not observant and came to shul on the 'High Holidays' for yahrzeits and yizkor. Most of the congregants did not have an extensive Torah education. In 1946 Rav Miller was offered the position of rav. I doubt any of the congregants realized what they were getting when they hired him.

Rav Yisroel Salanter is purported to have said, "Any rav whom the ba'alei batim do not want to get rid of is not a real rav, and any rav whom the ba'alei batim do get rid of is not a mensch!" What he meant is that the job of a rav is to raise the level of his congregants. To do this, he has to make them feel uncomfortable, because someone who is comfortable with his way of life will see no reason to change. On the other hand, if the rav puts too much pressure on the people, they will rebel and fire him. I have a feeling Rav Miller had this in mind when he set about changing the lives of his congregants.

How does a rav uplift the level of Torah observance of his ba'alei batim? How does he take men and women with limited or in some cases virtually no background in learning and transform them into people who come regularly to shiurim?

Most rabbonim have taken the approach of being mekarav people by sugar-coating their words and refraining, at least publicly, from saying things that the congregants do not want to hear. Not so Rav Avigdor Miller. He felt it was his job to 'tell it the way it is,' even though this meant that some would be uncomfortable when they heard his words.

While it was by no means his intention to drive people away, if people left the shul because they did not like what he said, then so be it. More than once I heard him say something to the effect of, "This is the truth. You probably haven't heard it anywhere else before. You may not like it, but, nonetheless, what you are hearing is the truth!" < BR>

Murray M. and his wife were newlyweds when they began davening in the Young Israel of Rugby in the late forties. Murray told me that the president would come to shul on Shabbos morning and then go play tennis in the afternoon. Rav Miller often spoke about the importance of keeping Shabbos. It did not take too long before this president left the shul. Others who behaved similarly did the same. Those who remained, however, became staunch followers of Rav Miller. They found their commitment to Shabbos and the observance of other mitzvos strengthened by his words.

One should not get the impression that Rav Miller was not attuned to the feelings and thoughts of his congregants. His words from the bimah were indeed hard hitting, but in his personal dealings with his congregants he always tried to draw them close to Torah observance through encouragement.

Murray told me that while he lived in East Flatbush there was a young couples group that met Friday evenings after the seudah. It is well known that Rav Miller jealously guarded his time and devoted as much of it as possible to Torah learning and teaching. Despite this, Rav Miller regularly attended these gatherings. Recalled Murray: "He would come, listen attentively, but never say a word. At the end he would leave, wishing each of us a 'Good Shabbos.' "

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Perhaps Rav Miller was 'taking the pulse' of the younger generation so that he would know how best to deal with them.

### **A Master Pedagogue**

Rav Miller was known for his hasmoda. However, despite - or perhaps more correctly because of - his unbelievable commitment to his own Torah learning, he found time to constantly give shiurim and lectures on a wide variety of topics.

Initially Rav Miller gave shiurim in the Young Israel of Rugby on such topics as Mishna, Chayei Odom and Ein Yaakov. In 1967 a visiting gadol encouraged Rav Miller to set higher goals for his congregants and teach them 'gantz shas.' Hearing this, Rav Miller began to teach Gemara to a group of about fifteen men, many of whom had little or no yeshiva background. Little did they know they were embarking upon a journey that would change their lives.

Rav Miller always emphasized that one had to 'get the language of the Gemara into one's mouth.' He urged those who came to his shiurim to repeat the Gemara over and over again. "Practice it until you can say the blat like you say Ashrei!" he often would say. More than once I heard him observe that 'there are people who attend Gemara shiurim for years, and yet they cannot read a piece of Gemara fluently.'

He began teaching Shnayim Ochazim B'Talis and basically started with Aleph Bais. It took a year to cover three blatt of Gemara. Yet at the end of that year all of his talmidim knew it cold. One marvels at how a man who had studied in one of the finest yeshivas in the world found the patience to teach on this level. When one thinks of the self-control it must have taken, it becomes even more impressive.

From this humble beginning the group went on to greater achievements. Additional shiurim were added, and with each passing year more and more people attended them. Someone once commented, "Most rabbonim take bnei Torah and make balabatim out of them. Rav Miller takes balabatim and makes bnei Torah out of them."

To what extent did Rav Miller raise the level of his congregants? Let me share with you an experience I had in 1973. Rav Miller was still in the 'old' neighborhood, and I spent a Shabbos at the Young Israel of Rugby that I will never forget. It was especially memorable because I had the privilege of eating the Friday evening seudah in his home.

On Shabbos afternoon, a little more than an hour before Mincha, Rav Miller and I and some others walked to shul where he gave an hour-long hashkafa shiur. We then davened Mincha and ate seuda shlishis. When bentching was concluded, there was still some time - about twenty minutes - until Maariv. Everyone went upstairs, took out a sefer and began to learn. I had never seen anything like this in any other place I had davened. No one was schmoozing. Instead, every man was engrossed in his learning.

### **Bais Yisroel Torah Center**

In 1975 Rav Miller relocated his shul to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn and renamed it Bais Yisroel Torah Center. Here he expanded the number of shiurim he gave to an average of three a day. There were also his Shabbos droshos, his weekly hourly talk before Mincha on Shabbos, his Chovos Halevavos classes on Friday evenings during the winter, the learning of halacha between Mincha and Maariv, his regular Thursday evening hashkafa shiurim, and much more. It is difficult to understand how he could maintain such a demanding schedule while devoting countless hours to his own private learning, but he did. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that each Gemara shiur he gave at a fixed time and day was devoted to either a different perek in the Gemara he was learning that year or to a different mesechta entirely.

### **Thursday Evening Hashkafa Shiurim**

Rav Miller became famous for his Thursday evening lectures which dealt with a wide variety of topics. One never knew what he would start with and where he would end up during these talks. In addition, there was an open question and answer period at the end, and it is here that one got a taste for Rav Miller's breadth of Torah and secular knowledge. Virtually anything could be asked, and it was. Amazingly, he always had a ready, well thought-out answer, no matter what the question.

Tapes of these talks were made available beginning in the early seventies at a nominal fee, and people from all over the world ordered them. Here was a man who sat in a small shul in Brooklyn whose Torah was heard worldwide. Through these tapes and his books he influenced countless individuals. There are even those who never met him who consider him their rebbe. Rav Miller understood the power of technology and utilized it to spread his Torah teachings far and wide.

### **Appropriating His Time**

Rav Miller always guarded his time jealously and, whenever possible, used it for either teaching or learning. When asked to attend this or that simcha or other event, he would usually decline, saying, "I have to study for my final exam." If the person to whom he was talking didn't understand what he meant, he would explain that he was going to be examined in the World to Come and wanted to be prepared.

Sometime in the 1980's he told me he once wanted to go to the Lubavitcher Rebbe for advice on how he should spend his remaining years. "Should I stop giving shiurim and concentrate on clinching all of my learning" Or, perhaps I should give more shiurim and thus help others to a greater extent.?

He went on to relate that he had made an appointment to see the Lubavitcher Rebbe. "But when I heard you had to go at two in the morning, I canceled my appointment! I never go

anywhere that late at night. I am always in bed by eleven-thirty at the latest." I then asked how he had resolved his dilemma, and he replied, "By doing some of both, reviewing my learning as much as possible and giving shiurim."

#### Straining the Emunah

Rav Miller was a 'rationalist' and would dismiss any story that smacked of the esoteric with a wave of his hand, saying, "We are not m'chuyev to believe such a story." I once related to him a story that Rav Chaim Volozhin had written about the Vilna Gaon as part of the introduction to one of the Gaon's seforim. Rav Chaim wanted to prove that the Gaon was an expert in Kabbalah and related an amazing story about the Gaon teaching his chiddushim in Kabbalah to the Arizal and Reb Shimon Bar Yochai.

Rav Miller waved away the story, despite the fact that it came from an impeccable source. I then asked why he always dismissed such stories out of hand. He replied, "Our emunah is strained enough by what we are required to believe. To add anything more is not wise."

Only later, when I became familiar with the Shabbtai Tzvi movement and the outlandish things that people who lived at that time believed did I begin to appreciate the wisdom of his words. Rav Miller was an expert in history, and, of course, he knew what he was talking about.

#### The Sum of a Great Man

One cannot do justice to a man as great as Rav Miller in a few articles. The many things he did, his influence on others, his commitment to Yiddishkeit, his idealism, his hasmoda and so much more, cannot be easily summarized. Perhaps the words that appear on a plaque in his shul give some indication of the measure of the man. The plaque is dedicated to his memory, and the English part of it reads:

OUR BELOVED REBBE  
WHO LED AND GUIDED OUR KEHILLAH FOR 53 YEARS INSTRUCTED US IN TORAS  
HASHEM DAY AND NIGHT SHOWED US HOW TO RECOGNIZE HAKODOSH BORUCH HU  
THROUGH HIS GREATNESS TIRELESSLY AND ELOQUENTLY LED THE BATTLE FOR  
THE HONOR OF HASHEM AND THE TRUTH OF HIS TORAH INSPIRED US TO  
ACCOMPLISHMENT IN LIMUD HATORAH AND PERFECTION OF CHARACTER TRAINED  
US TO BE AWARE ALWAYS OF HASHEM YISBORACH, AND TO EXPRESS ENDLESS  
GRATITUDE TO THE BOREI OLOM FOR ALL THE DETAILS OF OUR LIVES AND TAUGHT  
US TO VIEW THE WORLD THROUGH THE HASHKOFOS HATORAH  
DEDICATED BY HIS TALMIDIM, WHO ARE ETERNALLY GRATEFUL

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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](http://g2.stevens-tech.edu:7070/ramgen/llevine1/r_miller_5_05_04.rmj).

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