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Harav Avigdor Miller's First *Rabbanus*

The Walnut Street Shul

By

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Harav Avigdor Miller was born on 2 Elul, 5668 (August 29, 1908). On the week of his birthday, Hamodia reviews the history of the magnificent shul in which Rav Miller began his illustrious career.

INTRODUCTION

Harav Avigdor Miller, ז"ל, studied in the Slabodka Yeshiva in Lithuania from 1932 until 1938. Upon his return to the United States, Rav Miller and his family lived with his parents in Baltimore, Maryland, until the early spring of 1939, when he became the Rav of Congregation Agudath Sholom in Chelsea, Massachusetts. This magnificent shul was and still is located at 145 Walnut Street. It is almost always referred to as the Walnut Street Shul. Rav Miller served the congregation until November 1944, when he left Chelsea to assume the position of *mashgiach* at Mesivta Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, New York.

Chelsea, Massachusetts

Chelsea is located about five miles northeast of Boston, Massachusetts and occupies an area of 1.8 square miles. It was settled in 1624 by the British and named the Winnisimmet trading post, because it is near the Winnisimmet River. According to local historical records, Nathan Morse, the first Jewish resident of Chelsea, arrived in 1864. In 1890 there were eighty-two Jews living in Chelsea. Some of the many Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe who immigrated to the United States between 1890 and 1920 settled in Chelsea. By 1910 the number of Jews had grown to 11,225, nearly one-third of the entire population of the city. In the 1930s there were about

20,000 Jewish residents in Chelsea out of a total population of almost 46,000. Given the area of the city, Chelsea may well have had the most Jews per square mile of any city outside of New York.

History of the Walnut Street Shul

In 1887, Jews gathered in the home of Monas Berlin to daven on Shabbosos and *Yamim Tovim*. In time the minyan moved to new quarters. It was called Congregation Ohabei Shalom. By 1901 the growing congregation had enough funds to purchase property at the corner of Walnut and Fourth Streets, which was to become the site of the Walnut Street Shul. In the early 1900s Congregation Ohabei Shalom merged with another group under the name Congregation Agudas Sholom.

This became the largest congregation in Chelsea and had almost completed a new shul building on the Walnut Street site when it was destroyed by fire in 1908.

The destroyed building was rebuilt from a design by non-Jewish architect Harry Dustin Joll, in 1909. The magnificent structure was sometimes called the “Queen of Synagogues” and is believed to have been the largest shul in New England at the time. In the bylaws of 1909, the founding members declared that “The organization shall carry the name of ‘Congregation Agudas Sholom of Chelsea, Massachusetts’ and shall be conducted as strictly Orthodox. The congregation shall consist of a school for learning, a shul for prayer, and everything shall be carried out strictly under the requirements of the Jewish religion and under the strict Jewish laws and customs as govern other Orthodox congregations – and this paragraph shall not be changed so long as there are seven members in good standing who are satisfied to support the charter of this congregation.”

The ground floor of the shul contains a kitchen and two *battei medrash*, a smaller one that was used for daily davening and a larger one, where Shabbos services usually took place. The men’s section of the main shul is one flight up. The *aron* of the main shul stands 37.5 feet high and is made of solid oak with carvings of animals and symbols from the Torah. The women’s gallery is located on the third floor, with a seating capacity nearly equal to that of the men’s section downstairs. Together, the men’s and ladies’ sections on the second and third floors can seat 1109 people.

The ceiling is decorated with a fresco of the sky with a sunrise at the east end, and over the women's section is a painting of *kever Rachel*. Over the *aron* is a trompe-l'oeil-curtained niche supported by Corinthian columns and decorated with symbols from the *Beis Hamikdash*. The large main shul was used primarily during the *Yamim Tovim* and *Yamim Nora'im*.

Photographs can give a general impression of the grandeur of this imposing structure, but they cannot do it justice. When my wife and I visited the shul in May of this year, we were both overwhelmed by the beauty of this *mikdash me'at*.



The shul's exterior



Beis medrash on the ground floor



The main shul as seen from the men's section



The main shul as seen from the ladies' section



The painted ceiling

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@06Chelsea Jewry in the 1930s

During the 1930s the Jewish population of Chelsea was large enough to support fourteen Orthodox synagogues. Each of these shuls catered to specific groups. For example, most of the Jews who had come from Lithuania davened in the Walnut Street Shul, so it was often called the Litvishe shul. On the other hand, the Orange Street Shul was known as the Russishe shul. During the *Yamim Nora'im* there were so many Jews walking in the streets to attend shul that certain streets were cordoned off from traffic to accommodate the crowds, and police were called in to direct traffic.

What was *Yiddishkeit* like in Chelsea during the thirties? When I asked someone who had spent his boyhood and teens in Chelsea at that time, his face lit up. “*Yiddishkeit* was beautiful then,” he replied. I remember going to the Russishe shul for *seuda shelishis*. They always had visiting Rabbanim who gave wonderful *derashos*. I can still smell the herring!”

However, all was not well Jewishly in Chelsea. Moshe Isseroff grew up in Chelsea. His father was a *shochet*, and his home was strictly observant. “There were only two or three families living near us that were strictly *shomer Shabbos*,” he told me. “The shuls were full, but 90 percent of those attending were sixty or older. Of the remaining 10 percent, half were between the ages of twenty and sixty and half were under twenty years of age.” Young people in general were not interested in living their lives as Orthodox Jews.

Where was the younger generation?

As was the case in virtually all cities in the United States at this time, there were no yeshivos or Bais Yaakov schools in Chelsea. The children attended public school in the morning and early afternoon, and then went to the Chelsea Hebrew School. However, this school primarily taught Jewish culture. Students learned to read and write Hebrew, some Jewish history and a bit of *Chumash*. The education offered by the Chelsea Hebrew School was virtually devoid of religious content.

There were some parents who hired a *melamed* to learn with their sons for a few hours a week, but this could not compete with the all-pervasive attraction of the secular environment. Unfortunately, a good percentage of the Hebrew School teachers and *melamdim* were not very well qualified to

teach. All in all, during this period very few school-age children received anything like a decent Jewish education. In addition, many of the parents who were observant had scant Jewish educations themselves. Their practice of Judaism was based on what they had seen in their parents' homes while growing up in Europe or Russia, not on any firm knowledge of halacha and other aspects of Judaism.

Rav Miller Enters the Scene

When Rav Miller came to Chelsea in the early spring of 1939, he immediately set about doing whatever he could to stem the tide of young people's defection from Orthodoxy.

Henry Marmer, who was born and raised in Chelsea, came from a strictly *shomer Shabbos* home. His parents had engaged a *melamed* to study with him from the time he was about three years old. He continued to learn with a *melamed* well into his late teens. Still, he felt that his *Yiddishkeit* could use strengthening.

In 1939 he saw a sign in one of the many small groceries that were on almost every corner in Chelsea. It read, "Is G-d Dead? A Lecture by Rabbi Avigdor Miller at the Walnut Street Shul." Henry decided to attend the lecture, and what he heard strongly affected the course of his life. The result was that he came under the influence of Rav Miller. How far did that influence extend? At one point Henry, who is a *kohen*, was considering medical school. When Rav Miller pointed out to him in no uncertain terms that he could never dissect a cadaver, he abandoned his plans to study medicine and became a pharmacist.

Henry told me that in the early 1940s Rav Miller bought a number of Schick electric shavers. He then called a group of young men to a meeting in his home and told them that the Torah forbids one to shave with a razor blade. "For \$11 you can buy a shaver and do a big mitzva. Either buy one or grow a beard!" Many of those present purchased electric shavers.

Seeing the desperate need for quality Jewish education in Chelsea, Rav Miller responded in a variety of ways. He announced publicly that he was willing to learn with any boy at no charge. Many parents took advantage of this offer, and those boys who studied with Rav Miller came under his influence.

With great difficulty Rav Miller founded an afternoon Talmud Torah that focused on teaching *Yiddishkeit* as opposed to teaching Jewish culture. Following is an article from the November 22, 1941 issue of the Chelsea Record:

Yeshiva Academy Dedicated During Impressive Rites

The new building of the Yeshiva Or Yisroel Talmudical Academy was recently dedicated with ceremonies in the Hebrew school, where Rabbi Isaac Hutner, dean of the Rabbinical College, Brooklyn, N.Y., delivered an address in which he pointed out the spiritual potentiality of American youth. The two keys to the new building were purchased by William A. Feinberg and Barney Glassman.

From the Hebrew school hall the participants, headed by two Torah scrolls carried by Rabbi Jacob M. Lesin and Rabbi Avigdor Miller, under a huge American flag, marched to the Yeshiva building at Crescent and Clark Avenues. Chairman for the evening was Harry Kraft, of Brookline, president of the New England Mizrahi Organization. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Boston emphasized the vital role in American Judaism played by institutions such as the yeshiva in Chelsea. Harris L. Selig, well-known writer, and the director of the United Yeshivas Foundations in New York, described the chaos in religious matters and stated that the yeshivas were striving to remedy the situation. Mayor Bernard L. Sullivan addressed the crowd, encouraging the Jewish citizens of Chelsea and nearby communities to back the institution.

Rav Miller also encouraged boys to go to New York to study in Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin. He was successful in this endeavor with some boys from Chelsea and other nearby cities. On August 31, 1942, the Chelsea Record reported:

Chelsea Boys Enter School of Theology

A crowd of 300 persons thronged the vestry of the Walnut Street synagogue last night to bid farewell to two Chelsea boys, Abraham Kramer, 16, and Harold Shapiro, 14, on the eve of their departure for the Mesivta Theology College at Brooklyn, N .Y. The exercises were conducted under the auspices of the Chelsea Yeshiva. Among the

guests were Rabbi Jacob M. Lesin and Rabbi Mendel Levittes of Dorchester. Morris Wolper was chairman of the evening. Mrs. Zablotsky was in charge of refreshments. This morning Rabbi Avigdor Miller, principal of the Chelsea Yeshiva, left for New York with the two boys.

(Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Lesin, *zt"l*, was Rav Miller's father-in-law and one of the foremost *talmidim* of the Alter of Slabodka. He had been a Rav in Lithuania before coming to the United States. Eventually he became the *mashgiach* at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan in Manhattan.)

One cannot help but contrast the world of today with that of 1942. Who today would even think of making a gathering of 300 people in a shul to mark the fact that two boys were leaving to study in a yeshiva? Rav Miller, however, understood the importance of this event, which was most uncommon at that time. He therefore did his best to publicize it so that others might follow these boys and study in Chaim Berlin themselves.

Harold Shapiro, one of the first two boys from Chelsea whom Rav Miller sent off to study in yeshiva, became known as Aharon Shapiro when he attended Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin, where he studied from 1942 until 1950. In that year he received *semicha*. He then served a Rabbi in shuls in Washington, D.C., Linden, NJ, Plainview, Long Island, and Queens, New York. He also earned a PhD in economics and became a professor at St. John's University. Rabbi Dr. Shapiro is now retired from both the Rabbinate and teaching college. He told me that in the early 1940s Rav Miller was the only Orthodox Rabbi in Chelsea who spoke English. "Rav Miller was the most influential person in my life," he went on to say. "He sent me to yeshiva, and because of this I became a Rabbi. He had a great influence on me!"

It is worth noting that the Talmud Torah Or Yisroel that Rav Miller founded eventually became a day school, the Chelsea Hebrew Academy. This school was run by Israel Kaufman, one of the young men with whom Rav Miller learned while he lived in Chelsea. This day school continued to educate the youth of Chelsea and the surrounding area until it closed in the sixties due to insufficient enrollment.

The Walnut Street Shul after Rav Miller's Departure

Rav Miller left Chelsea at the end of 1944. The November 30, 1944 issue of the Chelsea Record noted:

Rabbi Avigdor Miller, spiritual leader of the Walnut Street synagogue, has resigned and will leave for Brooklyn, N.Y., where he has accepted a position as supervisor of the Chaim Berlin Rabbinical College of the city. Rabbi Miller came to Chelsea in the early spring of 1939 and founded the Yeshiva together with Rabbi Jacob Lesin of Dorchester. The officers and members of the synagogue will hold a reception for Rabbi and Mrs. Miller Tuesday night, December 12.

Rav Miller's leaving did not, of course, mean the end of the Walnut Street Shul. However, during the Thirties the first exodus of Jews from Chelsea to the suburbs began. By the 1950s the Jewish population had decreased to about 8,000. The construction of the Tobin Bridge near the shul in the 1940s led to concerns over the shul building. For a time there was even fear that the synagogue might be torn down. Fortunately, this did not happen.

Rav Miller had succeeded Rabbi Phillip Israelite as Rav of the shul and was succeeded by Rabbi Kalman Lichtenstein. In addition to serving as Rav, he was the director of the Chelsea Hebrew Day School. In 1963 Rabbi Lichtenstein was appointed Rosh Mesivta of the Lubavitch Yeshiva High School. In the 1970s the membership of the shul continued to decline, even though it still had a daily minyan. Rabbi Lichtenstein retired in the late 1970s, after which the shul became a "ship without a captain."

The Jewish population of Chelsea continued to dwindle, and in 1979 the Chelsea Hebrew School closed its doors. By 1980 only three of the fourteen shuls that had once been packed with *mispallelim* were still barely functioning. In the early 1980s the Walnut Street Shul combined with the Elm Street Shul, and Rabbi Nochum Cywiak, who had been the Rav of the Elm Street Shul, became the spiritual leader of the Walnut Street Shul. By 1998 the Walnut Street Shul was the only functioning Orthodox synagogue in Chelsea. Rabbi Cywiak recently moved from Chelsea to Brookline, but he assured me that he will be back during the *Yamim Nora'im* and other *Yamim Tovim* to lead the congregation.

The declining number of *mispallelim* at the Walnut Street Shul took its toll on the building. In 1989, Herb Kupersmith, a former Chelsea resident and member of the shul, noted that while the exterior of structure was in fine condition, the interior was in a state of disrepair. Windows were boarded up, the ceiling murals were fading, and the magnificent Aron needed to be restored. Kupersmith, with the assistance of Rabbi Cywiak, embarked on a campaign to raise funds for the restoration of the shul.

In time Herbie, as he is known to many, raised \$100,000, enabling the completion of needed repairs that brought the shul back to its former magnificent state. In 1993 Congregation Agudath Sholom was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. This means that the shul can never be torn down. However, funds are required to defray the costs of the regular maintenance needed to keep the shul from again falling into disrepair. Rabbi Cywiak told me that whenever he would meet Rav Miller during a visit to Brooklyn, Rav Miller would ask him how the shul was doing. Rav Miller would then encourage him by saying, “Keep it going! Keep it going!”

Donations to maintain the shul may be sent to Congregation Agudath Sholom, Walnut Street Synagogue, P. O. Box 505265, Chelsea, MA 02150.

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