

Two Letters from Rav Mordechai Gifter, ל"צ

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Note: Recently Rabbi Binyamin Gifter gave me two letters that his father, Rav Mordechai Gifter, ל"צ, had written to a "Mr. Siegel" in Baltimore while Rav Gifter was studying in the Telshe Yeshiva (1932 – 1939). He had typed a draft from hand written copies of these letters. This article is based on these letters. I wish to express my thanks to Rabbi Gifter, who had received the letters from Rabbi Yossy Florans, a grandson of Mr. Siegel, for bringing these letters to my attention and also for reviewing this article.

The letters are reproduced exactly as written. As a result, the first letter is signed "Max Gifter." This letter also refers to Rabbis Yehudah Davis and Avigdor Miller by their English names. The reader may find this surprising, given the almost universal practice within the Charedi world today of using Hebrew names. However, it should be kept in mind that in the thirties, when these letters were written, the common practice in America was to use "English names."

Introduction

Many of us are interested in the lives of *Gedolim*. After all, there is much for us to learn from how they faced the challenges of life, how they dealt with others, how they reacted to various situations, etc. However, rarely do we have the opportunity to get a first hand glimpse into the thinking of a *Godol* before he became recognized for his greatness. What were his thoughts? What did he feel was important for the Jews in the city in which he grew up? What were his early views on world movements?

Rav Mordechai Gifter was born in Portsmouth, Virginia on 7 Heshvan, 5677 (November 3, 1916). His family moved to Baltimore in 1918, where he attended public school and Talmud Torah in the afternoon. Rav Gifter's uncle, Rabbi Samuel L. (Yehudah Leib) Sar, ע"ה, was the Dean of the Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological Seminary (RIETS). He convinced Rav Gifter's father, Reb Yisroel, to send his son to high school at RIETS. "My father told me that he knew only one blatt of Gemorah when he went to New York to be tested for admission," Reb Binyamin Gifter related. "However, he progressed so quickly that he was soon attending the shiurim of HaRav Moshe HaLevi Soloveitchik."¹ Rav Gifter regarded Rav Soloveitchik "as his mentor, chiefly in the foundations of *derech halimud*."²

Upon completion of high school in 1932, Rav Gifter was encouraged by Rabbi Sar, who had learned in Telz, to go to Europe to study. Mr. Morris Siegel, ל"ר, also urged him to go to Europe to study Torah. Rav Avigdor Miller, ל"צ, likewise had a part in Rav Gifter going to Telz. Rav Miller told me, "I remember sitting on the curb in Baltimore with Rav Gifter. I told him to go to Europe to learn, and he listened!"³ One cannot help but wonder how a sixteen year-old could embark alone on such a long and arduous journey by ship. Rav Gifter related how his father cashed in an insurance policy to pay for his passage.⁴ "Throughout his life he (Rav Gifter) frequently referred to his father's love of Torah and outstanding character traits, especially noting his integrity."⁵

The Letters

While studying in Telz, Rav Gifter corresponded regularly with his father. He also wrote from time to time to Mr. Morris (Yosef Moshe HaLevi) Siegel, a resident of Baltimore with whom Rav Gifter was very close. Reb Binyamin gave me two letters written by his father to Mr. Siegel. Morris Siegel was born in Baltimore in 1902, the fifth of eight children. His parents had come to Baltimore in the late 1800s from Ponevezh. Mr. Siegel was one of a small group of young people who, in 1918, formed a group called Adath Bnai Yisroel. The members of this group were committed to *Shmiras Shabbos*, something not very common in those days amongst young people.

For much of his life Mr. Siegel ran Shabbos groups for youngsters. These groups encouraged the youth, even those from non-observant homes, to become *Shomrei Shabbos*. As a boy Rav Gifter was influenced by his participation in these gatherings. Indeed, he and Mr. Siegel remained friends throughout Mr. Siegel's life. Mr. Siegel was *nifter* on ר"ח אלול תשמ"ט.

Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Siegel, a son of Mr. Siegel, was kind enough to share with me a letter that Rav Aharon Feldman, presently Rosh Yeshiva of Ner Yisroel Yeshiva, wrote to him on טו כסלו תש"נ (December 14, 1989). The letter was written approximately a month after Mr. Siegel's passing. In it Rav Feldman writes, "Your father, as you well know, was one of the עשרה ראשונין of everything that was Yiddishkeit in Baltimore. For me personally he was a powerful example – an American I could identify with who was frum, consistent in his יראת שמים, so thoroughly עהרליך, and a מקדש שם שמים just by being what he was."

The two letters are written primarily in English. One is dated "April 7, '35." The second is dated "ו' עש"ק ב' דר"ח אדר, תרצ"ז טלז" (February 12, 1937).

The 1935 letter tells how pleased Rav Gifter was to be studying Torah in the Telshe Yeshiva. "The spiritual enjoyment to be had from study of the Torah is beyond all description. It is only to be felt, and that, only for one who studies in the yeshiva of Telz." He considered Telz to be "the greatest (yeshiva) in the

world” at that time. The reader should keep in mind that Rav Gifter was only eighteen years of age at this time.

This letter also tells us about Rav Gifter’s view of Zionism. Apparently, before he went to Lithuania, he did not see any real “dangers” in being a Zionist. However, since being in Lithuania he now “sees that their sole purpose is to break all that is traditional; to destruct all that is holy.” Rav Gifter then relates to Mr. Siegel what Rabbis Manuel Poliakoff, Aaron Paperman, Yehudah Davis, and Avigdor Miller were doing at this time. He ends the letter with a דבר אגדה in Yiddish.

In his letter written in 1937 Rav Gifter tells Mr. Siegel that “the Lithuanian ‘anshaung’ is regarded as the real Torah-true ‘anshaung.’” He stresses the importance of yeshiva education and categorizes the Talmud Torah system of Baltimore as “rotten.” (One has to keep in mind that in the twenties, thirties, and forties many observant Jewish parents sent their children to public school. They received their Jewish education in a Talmud Torah or from a private rebbe. In many cities there were no yeshivas, and even in places where there were, parents were often reluctant to send their children to “parochial” schools.) Rav Gifter urges that a campaign be started to recruit boys presently studying in Talmud Torah to enroll in the Baltimore Hebrew Parochial school. The letter closes with some news about Rabbis Yehudah Davis and Avigdor Miller, whom Rav Gifter had seen on a recent trip to Kovno.

Reading the letters, one cannot help but be impressed by the mature views that this young man expresses. They indicate clearly that here is a person who is destined for greatness in Torah.

The Letter of April 1935

Rav Gifter was eighteen years old when he wrote this letter. We quote from it in part.

Dear Mr. Siegel,

It’s quite a time since I’ve left America and haven’t once written to you, although we were the best of friends. You maybe answered that this is due only to the fact that time is precious in the Yeshiva, far more than in the business world where it is said that “time is money”. During the year and a half which I’ve spent in Telz studying our holy Torah, I’ve progressed quite a bit, ב"ה. The spiritual enjoyment to be had from study of the Torah is beyond all description. It is only to be felt, and that, only for one who studies in the yeshiva of Telz. At the present time Telzer Yeshiva is the greatest in the world. ... One may think otherwise, but I am thoroughly convinced as to the truth of the statement. You may think that this is due to favoritism, because I am a student in the

Telzer Yeshiva. This is, however, not true. You may rely on me in this fact.

I have been informed by my parents that you have become a member of the Brotherhood of the Ohr Yisroel congregation. I hope that you will utilize your powers among the youth in drawing them nearer to traditional, one hundred percent Judaism.

Knowing that you are a dire antagonist of Zionism I would ask you to see to it that Zionist speakers are not permitted to speak for the Brotherhood. You may be surprised to read such a statement from me. You must well remember our bitter discussions on the subject, you – con, and I - pro. The time has arrived, however, when I must admit that you were right. It is (hard) to recognize this fact in America where Zionism is not so active in Jewish life. However, in Lithuania and Poland, where Zionism is very active and takes a major part in Jewish life, one is able to see clearly the true face of Zionism. One sees that their sole purpose is to break all that is traditional; to destruct all that is holy. Even the Mizrachi is not much better than the rest of the rotten bunch. Only the fact that they are Jews prohibits one's saying, ימח שמו. Someday American Jews will also know this. And, I believe that that time is not far distant. I have been informed that the Agudas Yisroel movement is spreading slowly but surely in America. American Jews know very little about this movement. It was founded about forty years ago as a counter movement against Zionism by such great Jewish personalities as ר' ר' לייזער טלזער, ז"ל as חיים בריסקער, The Chofetz Chaim ר' זצוק"ל was one of its leaders. Now, the chief leader among the rabbis is the Gaon ר' חיים עוזר of Wilno. The sole purpose of this movement is to make all Jews one hundred percent Shulchan Aruch Jews. There is much to write about this movement and the great headway that it is making at the present day, but time does not permit me to do so.

Does the Adath still have its Saturday night gatherings of the Chevra Shas? If so, what מסכתא are you now studying? Have you "covered much ground" since I've left? Has the Chevra gained additional members?

Teddy (Rav Yehudah) Davis is living very nicely in Slabodka. He studies in the קאוונער כולל now, and we Americans stop in at his place whenever we have to be in Kovno. Victor (Rav Avigdor) Miller is also getting along finely. I had to be in Kovno the past week to have myself registered at the office of the American consul. Naturally the מכניס אורח was Teddy. I ate and slept at his home. His wife is a very religious young woman. I happen to know her from

New York. I used to come to her house to speak with her father. She was always very religious.

Well, let me know about all that I've asked about and put in any additional news which I may have forgotten to ask about.

Your friend,

Max Gifter

P.S. Regards to your wife and children, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. You may enclose an answer to my letter together with my parent's letter.

The Letter of February 1937

ו' עש"ק ב' דר"ח אדר, תרצ"ז טלז

Dear Mr. Siegel,

I have just received your letter and was indeed very happy to hear from you. I was really surprised at your receival (sic) of the letter, but I know that you are continuously busy and can find no time to write. Your עול דרך ארץ is quite a large one.

I always receive your regards through my father, זאל גזונט זיין, and am indeed very thankful to you. You write quite a bit of interesting news in your letter.

I knew nothing at all about the fact that Peritzky had left Baltimore but I am happy to hear that you will reorganize the Saturday night Talmud class. Rabbi Schwartz once studied in Telz, but before I arrived here. From what I have heard about him, he is the only German Rabbi that has a Lithuanian look on Judaism and Torah. The Lithuanian "anshaung" is regarded as the real Torah-true "anshaung," so that's quite a lot said about him. I wish you the best of success in your Gemorah class.

Happy to hear that you've bought a new home. May you dwell therein in the best of health and happiness.

My father wrote me of your Bible class, but I know that you could do nothing for our nation due to the fact that parents refuse to cooperate. The Talmud Torah system is a rotten thing for Baltimore. The Parochial school should make an energetic campaign for new pupils who until now have studied in the Talmud Torahs. If we want to have good Jews in Baltimore, our only hope lies in the Parochial School. There is much to write about Jewish education but the time does not permit me to do so at present.

I knew nothing of your great misfortune in the loss of your mother-in-law. ה' ינחם אתכם בתך שאר אבלי ציון וירושלים.

Happy to hear that the Adath is continuing to work diligently for חז"ל. שמירת שבת is the basis of Judaism. החזקת תורה ושמירת שבת say that כל המחלל שבת כאלו עובד עבודה זרה. I would like to write a bit lengthily about שמירת שבת but I cannot spare the time.

(Mendel, Manuel) Poliakoff is learning with התמדה. (Aaron) Paperman is now in Kovno. He is receiving מויכה there. After Purim he's traveling home. He's a big למדן. I received a card from him today. He has מויכה from that of the greatest rabbis in Lithuania. One of them is a Torah authority of great world renown, Rabbi Josef Zusmanowitz, the Yerushalmi. When he comes back home he will be one of the greatest למדנים in Baltimore. Baltimore can be proud of him indeed.

(Yehudah) Davis and (Avigdor) Miller are both married as you most probably know. They are not in Telsai. They study in Slabodka. I haven't seen them for over two years. But from what I hear they are getting along quite nice.

Well, a bit about myself. I'm getting along very well in learning השם. בעזרת השם. I'm also studying עירובין now. It is, as you say, a very difficult גמרא. It is one of the גמרות of עני"ן... עירובין. נזיר, עירובין. These three are regarded as the most difficult of the whole ש"ס.

I will sign off with a דבר אגדה in Yiddish.

הנאהבים והנעימים בחייהם ובמותם לא נפרדו. דער פשט האב איך געזאגט אזוי. וואס איז די פראבע אויב די אהבה איז טאקע איין אמתע, און דורכדרינגליכע וואס נעמט ארום דעם גאנצען מענשען, אונד ניט איין אויסערליכע, אויב די אהבה איז אזעלכע וועלכע טויט קאן אויך נישט אפטילען, דאן זעהט מען דאך אז די ידידות איז א צוזאמענבונד פון צוויי נשמות אונד נישט פון צוויי גופים. דאס איז די אמתע אהבה אונד ידידות אונד ניט אין איין בריעף שרייבען ביישטייט ידידות נור אין איין אויסקרייטזונג אויף די נשמה.

[“hane’ehovim v’hanimim b’chayehem uv’mosom lo nifrodu”

I explained the pasuk as follows:

What is the test if one’s love for another is a true love? One that completely encompasses the entire person, rather than just one part. If the love is such that death cannot separate (the parties), then one sees that the friendship is a bond of two souls and not of two bodies. That is the true love and friendship and not in one letter does a friendship matter, but rather “etched in” the soul!]

Extend my heartiest regards to all the members of your family.

ה' יברך את כולכם בכל טוב סלה,

מרדכי

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¹ Interview with Rabbi Binyomin Gifter on June 22, 2005.

² **HaRav Mordechai Gifter zt”l**, S. Bruchi, Dei’ah Ve Dibur B. Kahn and Yated Ne’eman Staff, 29 Teves 5761 - January 24, 2001
<http://chareidi.shemayisrael.com/archives5761/voera/argifter.htm>

³ Private conversation with Rav Avigdor Miller, January 2001.

⁴ Interview with Rabbi Binyomin Gifter cited in fn. 1.

⁵ **HaRav Mordechai Gifter zt”l** cited in fn. 2