
YESHIVAS BIRCAS HATORAH WHERE PONEVEZH MEETS THE OLD CITY

ESTHER ILANA RABI

Rabbi Nissim Tagger and Rabbi Avraham Ziskind — both *marbitzei Torah* living in Yerushalayim — had to go to South Africa to be introduced.

Rabbi Ziskind returns yearly to his hometown, Johannesburg, to give *shiurim* for a week before Pesach. His popular *shiurim* are well publicized, which is why some of the notices about his speaking schedule were still posted when Rabbi Tagger, Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Bircas HaTorah in the Old City, went to Jo'berg the week after Pesach. He asked his host, Mr. Leon Welcher, about Rabbi Ziskind, and Mr. Welcher commented on how closely the two rabbanim's views aligned on how to run a yeshivah and how to build a bochur.

THE IMAGE PROBLEM

Back in Yerushalayim, Rabbi Tagger was intrigued and met up with Rabbi Ziskind to discuss his educational philosophy. They saw eye-to-eye on some of the biggest improvements they believe need to be made to the common approach to turning a *ben Torah* into a proper *talmid chacham*.

Rabbi Tagger mentioned the Torah world's tremendous investment in the at-risk population. "The best bochurim, though, suffer from many of the same issues that afflict the at-risk kids, just to a lesser degree," Rabbi Tagger told Rabbi Ziskind. "People don't want to look at the issues that the entire generation grapples with, unless the bochur

is broken, on drugs, or OTD. As long as a good bochur is maintaining the yeshivah schedule, too many yeshivahs won't work to maximize his *avodas Hashem*."

The root of the problem is an overwhelming concern with image. "Is a yeshivah worried about its bochurim wearing the right shoes because dressing like proper *bnei Torah* enhances their *avodas Hashem*, or because it's worried about the impact colorful shoes may have on next year's registration?" he asked. "A Rosh Yeshivah who cares about his *talmidim* has to address *their* needs, not his own. This subtle distinction resonates in the heart of every *talmid*."

"You're speaking to my heart," Rabbi Ziskind said. He, too, wished the yeshivahs would acknowledge that even the top boys need guidance to develop a relationship with Hashem, and act on it.

MEN OF TRUTH

When a yeshivah's image takes precedence over the needs of its *talmidim*, *emes* is unattainable.

Rabbi Tagger recalls a time when he decided it would be better for his son to spend *bein hazmanim* on a guided tour to Poland, in a kosher environment with proper *hashgachah* than for his son to hang around the house; the pitfall of vacation. The problem? The trip began a couple of days before the *zman* ended. His son's prominent Rosh Yeshivah said, "He can go early, but don't let him know I said so."

"I can't teach my son to be dishonest," Rav Tagger protested. "Either you give him permission or you don't."

Eventually, the yeshivah decided he could go as long as he didn't tell any other bochurim he had permission to leave early. "But that response, 'Go, but do it behind my back,' that's scary," says Rabbi Tagger. "It shows the disconnect between the rabbis and their *talmidim*. They play these games in which the *talmidim* hide from the rabbanim. The rabbanim think that's what they have to do for their yeshivahs to maintain their status as an elite yeshivah. Such a concept is foreign to me and to Rabbi Ziskind."

The big yeshivahs hire dorm counselors from other yeshivahs. In



Rabbi Nissim Tagger, Rosh Yeshivah



Rabbi Avraham Ziskind will now be Rosh Yeshivah alongside Rabbi Tagger

Bircas, the older bochurim serve that role and get the *zechus* of helping the younger bochurim. They share the issues they themselves faced and grow by helping younger bochurim grow. As the older bochurim are close to the Rosh Yeshivah, he knows what's going on during free time. There's no "us vs. them" mentality in which the bochurim are viewed as being on a different team than the rabbanim. It's a win-win situation, in which the older bochurim bridge any gaps that might appear in the relationship between staff and students. This is one of the factors that makes Bircas bochurim feel so strongly connected to their Rosh Yeshivah.

Rabbi Tagger once gave a *shiur* in an out-of-town yeshivah in America. The boys were enthusiastic about the *shiur* and got deeply involved in the *sugya*. Rabbi Tagger's traveling companion suggested they apply to Bircas HaTorah. Their Rosh Yeshivah was noncommittal. "We first have to see which boys will be accepted to the big-name yeshivahs," he said.

"These are nice, good boys you have," said Rabbi Tagger's companion, "but they can barely lein a *daf* Gemara. What will they do in a huge *shiur* with very advanced boys?"

After being pressed, the Rosh Yeshivah confessed, "If I don't send students to the top three yeshivahs, I won't get boys enrolling in my yeshivah next year."

"If we extract the essence of what he's saying," Rabbi Tagger explains, "it was, 'My *parnassah* is more important than helping a *talmid* develop into a *ben Torah* in a way that's ideal for him.'"

BUILDING TORAH SCHOLARS

Turning a yeshivah high school student into a *ben Torah* requires a *shiur* that involves them and gets them excited about the Gemara. Rabbi Tagger and Rabbi Ziskind have different styles of teaching, but they complement each other.

Rabbi Tagger's approach is text-based, teaching the bochurim how to analyze and appreciate the deeper levels of *pshat* in the Gemara, Rashi, and Tosfos. "I've been privileged to teach Gemara *b'iyun* in prestigious yeshivahs for twenty-nine years, and I know that a cloudy *sugya* is a tragedy for a bochur," says Rabbi Ziskind. "Bochurim need a clear idea of what the Gemara is saying. The clarity that Rav Tagger imparts saves

them from this calamity."

Rabbi Ziskind's approach is more *sevara*-based. The thirty-three volumes of *Imros Avraham* he has authored delve into the *sevaros* in large areas of Shas.

Rav Shmuel Rozovsky *ztz"l* influenced Ponevezh's *derech halimud*, which is to analyze the *sevaros*. At the same time, in Mir, Rav Nachum Partzovitz *ztz"l* was teaching bochurim a style that's more anchored in the *pshat*. Rav Elya Baruch Finkel, a *talmid* of Rav Shmuel, went to Mir and became a *talmid* of Rav Nachum as well. "How did you manage to merge the two *derachim*?" his friend asked.

"Rav Shmuel opened my head and taught me how to think. Rav Nachum opened my eyes to see what's going on in the text — the beginning, middle and end of a *sugya*, and the arguments between *rishonim*," he said.

A similar melding is taking place in Bircas HaTorah. Before Rabbi Ziskind's weekly *shiur klali*, every *maggid shiur* in Bircas HaTorah helps the bochurim review his sources and understand his questions. Then they're fully prepared to be engaged in the *shiur klali*, instead of just listening to the *adam gadol* spin the Shas around on his finger and flex his "Torah muscles." The students are so well grounded in the Gemara and Rishonim, they're able to push Rabbi Ziskind to show them how his *sevara* is implicit in the *shakla v'tarya*. The bochurim love his approach, and are drawn like bees to nectar to hear Rabbi Ziskind's *shiur*.

That's the unique synergy that exists between Rabbi Tagger and Rabbi Ziskind, and that's why Bircas HaTorah is proud to announce that Rabbi Ziskind will now be Rosh Yeshivah alongside Rabbi Tagger.

Rabbi Ziskind admires Rabbi Tagger as a man of truth who does not deviate from *emes* in any way. He respects his commitment to undiluted *emes* in his Yiddishkeit, his learning and his *bein adam l'chaveiro*. "His reverence for *emes* can give a bochur direction for life," he says. He's also impressed by his dedication to each and every bochur in the yeshivah. "It's a father-son relationship. He'll do anything to enable a *talmid* to succeed and to develop his *yiras Shamayim*, no matter what hurdles he has to jump. These things make me happy to serve together with him as one of the Roshei Yeshivah of Bircas HaTorah."



The Bircas HaTorah Beis Medrash