

FROM THE RABBI'S STUDY



Courtesy of Yeshiva University

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Rabbi Zvi Romm

*Rav of the Bialystoker Synagogue
on the Lower East Side of Manhattan*

Would you please tell us a bit about your background, Rabbi Romm?

I grew up on the South Shore of Long Island. I learned in Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh in Eretz Yisrael, and later in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, where my primary *rebbe* was Rav Mayer Twersky. After marriage, I learned in two of its *kollelim*, one headed by Rav Hershel Schachter and the other by Rav Michael Rosensweig. I am also close with Rav Mordechai Willig, one of the *Roshei Yeshivah*.

What do you remember best about your rebbeim?

A defining characteristic of all these *rebbeim* is in line with what Chazal tell us in *maseches Megillah* (31a) that wherever we find the greatness of Hashem, we also find His humility. Their greatness in Torah notwithstanding, they are people of humility that manifests itself both within and outside the yeshivah. I am inspired by their ability to relate to Jews across the spectrum in a very straightforward manner.

There is a story about one of my *rebbeim* that illustrates this idea. Once, his teenage daughter had agreed to babysit for us. When she did not show up at the appointed time, my wife called the house to find out what happened. My *rebbe* picked up the phone and replied that she was not home. Apparently, there had been some misunderstanding about

the time. This great *talmid chacham*, without a trace of insincerity, offered, "I can come over to watch the baby while you go out." Needless to say, my wife, although she almost dropped the phone, refused the offer!

What is unique about the Bialystoker Synagogue and the Jewish community on the Lower East Side?

I have been at the Bialystoker Synagogue for 13 years now. The shul was established by immigrants from the town of Bialystok, Poland, on Hester Street in 1865. The *kehillah* later moved to Orchard Street, and ultimately merged with another congregation and moved to its current location on Willet Street, renamed Bialystoker Place, in 1905. This building, a former church built in the late Federal style, dates back to 1826, and is a New York City landmark.

We are very proud that our shul is a bastion of Torah and *tefillah* in the downtown area. We have four *Shacharis minyanim* each day, two *Daf Yomi shiurim*, a *Chevrah Shas*, *shiurim* in *Chumash*, *Navi*, *Mishnah Berurah* and a *shiur* for women, in addition to people who learn with a *chavrusa* or by themselves. In a historic neighborhood it is tempting to play up the achievements of the past, but history is important insofar as it is connected to *nitzchiyus*, eternity, and how the present ensures that *nitzchiyus*.

The Lower East Side has always been a bastion of

tremendous *chessed*. When Yidden relocated from Europe, their fellow immigrants would take them in and share the little they had with the newcomers. It is said in the name of Harav Moshe Feinstein, *zt"l*, that due to this *hachnasas orchim* the neighborhood merited continuity while newer neighborhoods did not.

In our neighborhood Yidden of all affiliations, backgrounds and ages get along and grow together in their quest to serve Hashem. Neighbors come together to prepare food for a large *sheva brachos*, a family that has just been blessed with a child, or, unfortunately, for a *shivah* house. I am constantly touched both by the gentleman who gives me a large check every few months to quietly provide for needy families in the neighborhood, as well as by the woman who brings me a bottle or two of grape juice every few months as a donation to the shul for *Kiddush*. In each case, they are giving what they can to support our shul and our community.

It is interesting to note that you have delivered shiurim on profound sefarim such as Meshech Chochmah, Shem MiShmuel and Haamek Davar.

For the past several years I have been selecting a particular *mefarsh* (commentator) on *Chumash* and delivered *shiurim* over the year on the *parshiyos hashavua* based on that *mefarsh*. We now are learning the *Shem MiShmuel*.

My aim is to take a particular idea and develop it. These *sefarim* lend themselves to such a presentation over the course of an hour-long *shiur*. Interestingly, one finds this common denominator with authors of varying backgrounds. *Meshech Chochmah* was penned by Harav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk, a *Litvishe Gadol*, and *Shem MiShmuel* by Harav Shmuel Borenstein, the second Sochatchover Rebbe, a *Chassidishe Gadol*. *Baruch Hashem*, my listeners have responded well to this format. They simply love to learn!

Do you teach elsewhere during the day?

Yes, I deliver a *Gemara shiur* in Yeshiva University, in its Isaac Breuer College division, which features *shiurim* on various topics such as *Gemara*, *Halachah*, *Tanach* and Jewish History at an advanced level. Last year I gave a class on Great Jewish Personalities. We focused on various *Gedolei Yisrael*, offering a biographical appreciation of each and delving into excerpts of their writings. The aim was to give the young men a flavor of each one's unique greatness. I enjoyed giving this class very much.

Do you encourage young men to enter the rabbinate?

Young people sometimes shy away from considering the

rabbinate, since a Rav admittedly has many responsibilities outside of delivering *shiurim*. I once related to the *talmidim* at Y.U. that I find the opportunities for *chessed* afforded me as a shul Rav have enabled my personal growth in ways that would not have been possible otherwise. I will give you one example.

I was once walking down Grand Street during my first year at the Bialystoker Synagogue and met a nonobservant Jew who attends our shul on the *Yamim Nora'im*. He requested that I speak with his mother. He proceeded to tell me that his mother reports she is plagued by demons, and cannot sleep at night. I wondered whether perhaps a psychologist was more in order than a Rav, but he explained that his mother, a European-bred woman, though not *frum*, really felt she needed a Rav. I understood her sentiments so I acquiesced.

When I arrived at her apartment she confirmed that this was her problem. I raised my hands over her head, recited a *perek of Tehillim* and told her, "You should know that Hashem is with you and I give you a *brachah* that the demons leave you alone. If they persist, tell them that Hashem is with you and the Rav gave his *brachah* and they therefore no longer have power over you."

Sometime later the son told me that his mother was fine. I relate this story not to prove I am a miracle worker, which I am not, but to demonstrate that a Rav can perform *chessed* in the most unexpected ways.

How can those of us who are not Rabbanim or educators have a positive impact on other people?

Everyone has opportunities to be a *mashpia*, and we all have circles of influence. One should certainly make efforts to influence others — neighbors, coworkers. While it is wonderful to engage in *chessed* and spreading Torah on the outside, we are most responsible to our families. According to the Torah, a father is a child's primary Torah teacher.

Additionally, one should seek to belong to a *kehillah* — whether a shul, a *shtiebel* or a *yeshiva* — from which he derives spiritual sustenance. One should also ask oneself what can be done to assist the Rav in strengthening the *kehillah* as a place of Torah and *tefillah*. There are so many opportunities to bolster Torah learning — one delivers the *shiur*, but others are needed to ensure the shul is open on time for the *shiur*, to set up the *sefarim* and coffee, and the like. Whatever is accomplished in our shul is due to this sense of partnership between the Rav and the *baalei batim*.

Thank you, Rabbi Romm. We wish you much continued hatzlachah in your avodas hakodesh. ■