

FEATURES

The French New Right, Sixteen Ounce Gloves, and *The Wire*:

An Exclusive Sit-down with Rabbi Schiller

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Rabbi Schiller is one of the most unique Rebbes in the MTA family. Everyone knows Rabbi Schiller for different reasons. For some it's the hockey legacy, others the politics, while many just know him as their kind, warm-hearted Rebbe. We were both in Rabbi Schiller's *shiur* last year and got to experience first hand all that he has to offer. We think it would be great for all students to know how special of a Rebbe and an individual he is. Although this interview only reveals a few trees in the forest that is Rabbi Schiller, we hope that it does him justice.

Academy News: What is your goal every year as a Rebbe?

Rabbi Schiller: To attempt, in however a weak and limited fashion, to bring *talmidim* and myself to G-d and His Torah in an atmosphere that is demanding but also caring and friendly, with a dash of fun as well.

AN: As most people know, you did not grow up in an Orthodox home. What attracted you to Orthodoxy and did your political leanings, which you developed at an early age, have anything to do with it?

RS: I was concerned with the meaning of life for as long as I can remember. I always agonized over religious questions. I would read the *World Book Encyclopedia* on Orthodox Judaism many nights as a child. In 5th grade, I became attracted to the American Conservative movement. I started reading the writings of Buckley, Kirk, and Goldwater. This led me to think about religion, since the American right at that time was based in a traditional, somewhat Christian, understanding of American society. In April 1964, at the height of the Goldwater campaign I, along with some of my friends, decided to become Orthodox for a month. I was 12 years old at the time. We visited various Orthodox communities. I was especially impressed when I visited New Square. When it was over, I just decided to stay with it. I started Yeshiva in 9th grade.

AN: How can you claim to be an advocate of *Torah U'Mada*, while you yourself were a high school dropout?

RS: The belief that G-d's creation is a means to approach Him and can imbue us with the greater passion for an understanding of His service is in no way linked to formal education. In fact, the deadening functionalism of the contemporary education scene generally crushes any true love or imagination in relation to the wonderful creation of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

AN: What is your opinion of HBO's *The Wire*?

RS: *The Wire* is a particularly profound piece of work. My assumption is that any truthful rendition of the human condition is inherently open to the Divine because the nature of humanity is to be open to the Divine. So, *The Wire*, if watched with an eye toward transcendent order, is, (although its creators, writers, and characters don't intend it), amidst its ugliness and ambiguity, a portrayal of human beings struggling to realize some vague approximation of the good in the severely constricted limitations of the modern inner-city world. So it reveals a yearning for G-d in the ugliness and ambiguity of modernity and it does it in a superbly realistic fashion.

AN: Can you explain the mechanics of some of the trick shots you pulled off in Checks (air-bubble hockey)?

RS: Well there are two exotic shots. If you take the right winger who has that big long heavy stick and you backhand it off the near boards, which is the right board, it creates enough of a snap and a backspin to make the puck bounce off the right boards, flip over the defenseman's stick, and land in front of the center. If you keep your hand on the center, while you're doing the backspin, the puck hops over and then you slam it home with the center, it makes for a dramatic goal. It doesn't work so often. It's more of a shot to get the crowd going, and your opponent demoralized than it is a high-percentage play. You get it, like, 1 out 8 tries. Second, is with the right defenseman, a very soft pass, done just right, can always split

the gap between the opposing center and left defenseman, landing the puck on your center's unchecked backhand.

AN: Would you say that, in your prime, you were one of the premier Checks players in the metropolitan area?

RS: I used to like to go visit arcades and places where Checks was a big game. When I was in another city for lectures I would always go to the arcade to find the good Checks players. I wouldn't say I was the best there is, but I would say I was up there. Of course, you need a good Checks game. The game has to be clean. You need to make sure before that the springs are tight and the sticks aren't bent, or else the bad surface just ruins the game.

AN: When you left the non-Orthodox world, you did not leave behind the culture that you had grown to love in those early years, and still embrace it today. How do you explain the dynamic between these two worlds?

RS: I don't think there are two worlds. G-d revealed absolute truth and created all of existence. Both are significant since He's the source of both. Of course, one must have a grounding in Orthodoxy, or else he will fall prey to the decadences of modernity and its divorce from G-d. However, if one does have that grounding, then it strikes me that both the physical world and the efforts of human creativity aren't devoid of significance in our approach to G-d.

AN: As a child, how did you choose which teams you rooted for?

RS: It's hard to enter back into your mind when you were 5 or 6 years old but, I think there were two working premises. That I wanted to do something different than my parents, and the team couldn't be too good, because I thought that was a moral flaw, to select a good team. I wouldn't have put it in those terms when I was 5, I would've said, "pick an underdog team." In baseball, it couldn't be the Dodgers, that was my parents' team, and it obviously couldn't be the Yankees because they were just too good. So I selected a National League team (as an anti-Yankee team), the Phillies, because I always liked the color red, and they were pretty bad in the mid-late 50's. And, in football, it couldn't be the Giants, so I chose the 49ers, since their jerseys were red, and in '57 they suffered a tragic playoff loss to the Lions, so that satisfied my qualifications.

AN: Why do you think soccer has never become popular in America?

RS: Americans are a very superficial people. Things have to happen very quickly. And the chess match subtleties of soccer, I think, are far too profound for the giddiness of the American soul.

AN: What were some of the social and political implications of the pullout from Gush Katif?

RS: I think the fundamental question is not Gush Katif. Rather, the question is whether inter-group relations should be viewed as a Darwinian, amoral struggle or should be founded upon reciprocity, upon a sense that we must grant the Other that which we cherish for ourselves. In other words, to see in the group-hopes, dreams and history of the Palestinian people the face of human beings, with yearnings similar to our own. Hence, the moral success or failure of Zionism is predicated upon our willingness to confront these issues with honesty and morality. The flaw in the Gush Katif pullout was that it failed to address these primary issues, together with the Palestinians.

AN: While you were coaching in the MYHSHL, what kind of commitment was required of your players?

RS: I went with the theory that whenever there was a day off from school, that if the team really wanted to win the championship, then they'd devote significant hours to that goal. Winter Break, President's Day Weekend, Thanksgiving, Chol Hamoed Succos, in between Yom Kippur and Succos, during which MTA used to have

off, so we had 4 days there. And we'd practice the whole day on these days off, 10-4, or 10-5.

AN: Why did you decide to stop coaching, especially through all the success you were having (six straight championships)?

RS: If sports is to be viewed as a lighthearted, silly thing, that we let children do, then obviously we're not going to devote too much attention to doing it right, worrying about rules, records, or even success. And, eventually, I just got so sick of having to deal with people who really didn't care about the whole thing, that I figured, at that point, we had won six in a row, enough was enough, time to get out. Plus, I doubt that the coddling parents and acquiescent schools of today would allow me to demand the standards I viewed as elementary.

AN: Recently, J.K. Rowling announced, seemingly out of nowhere, that a major character in the Harry Potter series was of a different persuasion. How do you think this affects the series as a whole, and what do you think of the decision to announce this after the release of the final book?

RS: The poor woman is a child of the modern European world, which is essentially an anti-culture, an anti-society. It's a society that wars against thousands of years of mankind's religious and natural assumptions and therefore she can do nothing other than parrot that which "the terror" has taught her to parrot so I'm sure that she thought she was doing some terribly noble thing for the liberation of people or some similar silly cliché that the mindlessness which envelops us summons us to, so she's just a victim of her time. As far as what it does for the series, I think the strength of the series is that it does present a somewhat sympathetic treatment of a traditional English setting. So I guess she felt that if she scored this one blow for "the terror" by doing something in favor of decadence and lunacy, "the powers that be" might like her more.

AN: You've called the period beginning in the mid-'60s "the eclipse," a time where the West embraced decadent culture as its norm. What would you say, brought about this "eclipse"?

RS: The unraveling of the soul of Europe begins with the Reformation, which yields the Enlightenment which is the total denial of G-d as the center of human activity. As this plays itself out, and various substitute religions are placed upon western man (communism, democracy, capitalism), eventually the thing just runs out of gas completely, and after the last rebellion of the '60s, you're left with the nothingness of, on the one hand, consumerist capitalism, and, on the other hand, the embrace of decadence. So, it's the playing out of a process that begins with the reformation and ends in the late '60s, the suicide of the West.

AN: How do you feel about the change over the past couple of years from the traditional one-Rebbe three hour *shiur* to a two hour *shiur* with one Rebbe and then *Tanach* or Jewish History for 45 minutes with another?

RS: I don't have particularly strong sentiments on either side of this question. I probably would say that I prefer the old system, and let the Rebbe determine when he wants to do *Chumash* and *Navi*, and other things. I think the new system creates a situation where you can't really forge any ties with the 45 minute group, it's neither here nor there. Also, sometimes you may first encounter a group that you may later have as a *shiur*, in this wishy-washy *Tanach shiur* setting, and this sabotages the real *shiur*. I do understand it from the sense that the three hour *shiur* may be too long in some *shiurim*, but by and large, I'd say I'm against the current system.

AN: Would you care to give a brief summary of your political odyssey?

RS: As noted earlier, I was attracted when I was ten or eleven to the American right of that period and eventually it proved insufficient for me, that American right, as it was devoted to constitutionalism, free enterprise, victory over communism, internal security concerns, and a vague affection for Christian culture. This proved to be watery soup for me and I became attracted to Brent Bozell's *Triumph*, a fine Catholic journal, which adopted the virtue side in the *Old National Review* freedom-virtue debate. This enabled me to explore continental European counter-revolutionary thought and its various inclinations.

The only rough approximation of this in America was to be found in the populist, communitarian, traditionalist renaissances associated with the likes of the Bryan campaign of 1896, the Union Party of 1936, and the assorted American Party incarnations of the '60s and '70s. However, in the '70s, having read *The Camp of the Saints* by Jean Raspail, I became aware that identity is not only extrinsic to the person, as in religion, culture, and moral/social ideology, but also adheres in the very identities of peoples. This position was further enhanced by my exposure to Alain de Benoist of the GRECE school of the French New Right, which posited an anti-globalism, an anti-egalitarianism, and an anti-individualism, rooted in the identities of real peoples in their essences and in their traditions.

AN: When you were young, you organized a boxing club?

RS: Yes, when I was in sixth grade we used to have a boxing club. I would do ratings and rankings and set up the weekly bouts. My next-door neighbor's mother was divorced, and when she left during the day to work, the apartment was empty, so we cleared out the furniture from the living room and set it up like a ring on all sides. We scheduled a whole series of bouts, with a ref, two judges, and a timekeeper, that would lead up to a weekly main event.

AN: Any memorable fights for you?

RS: Well, there were two. There's the victory over Alan Sanders, who was the coolest kid in the class. It was a first-round TKO, but it was sadly on the day before Easter vacation, so it didn't get back to the class like it should have, to my eternal regret. And then once they summoned this kid, Stevie Klein, from Kew Gardens Hills, I think, who was the toughest kid in that neighborhood. That one was in the PS 206 schoolyard. Huge crowd that day. They stopped it in the fourth round. They claimed that it was a TKO. I haven't forgiven any of them ever since.

AN: How do you want to be remembered as a person?

RS: Somebody who yearned for and was loyal to his faith, to *Torah* and the *derech ha-Baal Shem*, even when that was at times difficult. Somebody who was loyal to his race and civilization, even when that fell out of fashion. Somebody who was loyal to the people who crossed his path and who deserved that loyalty. Somebody who loved his children and his grandchildren more than they could imagine. And somebody who tried to treat everyone he encountered with decency, honesty, and, at times, humor and a little bit of friendship and love. No self-deceit, no illusions about institutions or people, a realism that bent its knee before G-d.

RABBI HECHT DEDICATION

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high school. In 1999, MTA was in deep financial straits. R' Norman Lamm almost decided to close the school but reconsidered because of a student and community protest. R' Lamm asked R' Hecht to assume the position of Dean of MTA. R' Hecht spent a sleepless night agonizing over the offer, but eventually decided to accept in order to save the school to which he was so dedicated.

After a long and distinguished career at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Hecht received some well-deserved recognition and a permanent *chelek* in future learning done in the Yeshiva in *Choshen Mishpat*, the area of *halacha* to which R' Hecht as a lawyer has a special connection. Fittingly, this recognition came from the source which has always gained the most from his exceptional abilities – his students.

R' Hecht continues to fulfill his most-beloved life calling teaching *shiur* at MTA, and we hope he will inspire *talmidim* in the school to learn *Torah*, love *Torah*, and live *Torah* for a long time to come.