

# ONLY TORAH!

## My Rosh Yeshiva Rav Moshe Green *zt"l*

An Interview with Rabbi Mayer Schiller



Rav Moshe Green

BY AVROHOM BIRNBAUM

Rav Moshe Green *zt"l* was among the unique *gaonim*, *marbitzei Torah* and *mechanchim* of the previous generation, especially in Monsey and Shikhan Skver, where he lived for most of his life. Rav Moshe wore many hats over the course of his life and particularly in the last two decades. His sage advice was often sought regarding numerous matters relevant to the *klal*, the general community and individuals.

That said, Rav Moshe was first and foremost a *rosh yeshiva* and *marbitz Torah*, a *maxmid* who devoted every fiber of his being to learning and understanding Torah and demanding that same dedication from his *talmidim*.

Rav Moshe's first position as *rosh yeshiva* began 58 years ago when the previous Skverer Rebbe, Rav Yaakov Yosef Twersky, insisted that he become *rosh yeshiva* at the then nascent Skverer Yeshiva. He made a profound impression on his *talmidim* in Skver, and virtually all of the senior *marbitzei Torah*, *rabbanim* and *poskim* in today's Skver are his *talmidim*. Rav Moshe went on to impact *talmidim* in other yeshivos, and for the last decade in his own yeshiva, Yeshiva D'Monsey, until his passing just before Pesach.

The *Yated* contacted one of his earlier *talmidim* from his years in Skver, Rabbi Mayer Schiller, who graciously shared his memories and impressions of his illustrious *rosh yeshiva*.

**Reb Mayer, how did you come to know Rav Moshe Green?**

I was not born and raised in Skver. My parents were not observant, and I found my way to Skverer *chassidus* on my own in the mid-1960s. Eventually, I joined the yeshiva and Rav Moshe became my *rosh yeshiva*. He

was really my model and mentor in everything pertaining to learning, including the approach and importance that one was required to have towards learning.

**What do you mean by the approach that one has to have towards learning?**

Let me backpedal a bit. Although Rav Moshe was really a no-nonsense type of *rosh yeshiva*, who didn't talk much about his past, at times he would talk about his *rabbaim* and his early years in Bais Medrash Elyon of Monsey and how important they were for his personal growth. You see, although Rav Moshe was *rosh yeshiva* in Skver, he didn't



Rabbi Mayer Schiller

have the classic type of Skverer background in pre-war Hungary or Romania. In fact, he was born here in America and, if I am not mistaken, went to public school as a young boy before entering the portals of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas. He once told me that in Torah Vodaas, the person who first turned him on to learning was Rav Yitzchok Karp, who was a *rebbe* in Torah Vodaas before going to Mesivta Bais Shraga in Monsey.

The *rosh yeshiva* of Torah Vodaas, Rav Reuven Grozovsky, imbued in his heart a powerful and tangible *ahavas haTorah* and dedication to become a *mevagei'a baTorah*. That dedication remained with him for the rest of his life.

**Did he ever talk about Rav Reuven and the impact he had on him?**

Absolutely. Even more than talking about Rav Reuven's *lomdus*, he would talk about his *hasmadah* and *yegiah*. He would tell us how Rav Reuven would spend entire nights toiling over a *sugya*, not making peace with the fact that something remained unclear. We clearly saw that he viewed Rav Reuven as his role model of how a person was to approach learning, the relentless tenacity, the drive to understand and be willing to work and work

on something until he gained clarity. He would also speak with great longing about the quest for purity in *avodas Hashem* that he saw in his fellow *talmidim* at Bais Medrash Elyon. He would say, "Ah! In Bais Medrash Elyon, *bocharim* would decide to take upon themselves to work on improving a certain *middah* and that would become their exclusive *avodah* for a while." One could see how he looked back with longing to those days of sustained *hasmadah* and *avodas Hashem* with his fellow *bocharim*. In addition to Rav Reuven, Rav Moshe enjoyed a close relationship with Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, who very much valued Rav Moshe's unique qualities.

**What other recollections did he share about his earlier years in Bais Medrash Elyon?**

He would tell us about the poverty in which all of the *yungeleit* in Bais Medrash Elyon lived and how they learned with great *hasmadah* despite the fact that they had no idea from where their next dollar would come.

When he got married, the *rosh yeshiva* and his *chaverim*, who would later become very famous in the Torah world, such as Rav Simcha Schustal, Rav Don Ungarischer, Rav Shmelke Taubenfeld and Rav Yacov Lipschutz, lived in tiny huts or bungalows located on Maple Avenue. The *kollel* had no money to pay them properly, and at times they really didn't even have enough money to properly buy food. Nevertheless, they sat and learned with tremendous *hasmadah*. Several decades later, maybe in the 1970s, I was speaking with Rav Yacov Lipschutz and Rav Moshe Green's name came up. Rav Yacov's eyes lit up and he said, "Rav Moshe Green? He has to know so much Torah! He has been



With Rav Ahron Teitelbaum of Satmar.

packing it in for so many years!"

**How did Rav Moshe, a product of Bais Medrash Elyon, get to Skver?**

In those days, in the early 1950s, there were *bochurim* from Bais Medrash Elyon who became attached to the previous Skverer Rebbe. They didn't live in Skver, but they showed up on special occasions, such as *Chamisha Assar B'Shevat, Lag Ba'omer* and the like. Reb Moshe was one of those *bochurim*, together with Rav Shmelke Taubefeld, the Bayer brothers and several others. It was a sight to see how these great *masmidim* stood *b'eimah ub'yirah* at the *tish* of the Skverer Rebbe. So, during his years as a *bochur* and young *jungerman*, he would occasionally come to Skver and consult with the *rebbe*, thus becoming close with the *rebbe*.

In 1962, the children of the first inhabitants of Shikkun Skver began to come of age to attend *mesivah*. Virtually all of them were children of Holocaust survivors born in the first few years after the war. They needed a *yeshiva*. The *rebbe* opened a *yeshiva* and asked Rav Moshe to become *rosh yeshiva*. Rav Moshe acquiesced and moved to Shikkun Skver, where he became *rosh yeshiva*.

**As a *talmid* in the *yeshiva*, how would you describe the way Rav Moshe taught his *talmidim*?**

Before answering your question in practical terms, I think that it is important to first tell you about the intangible impression that Rav Moshe made on us. I can unequivocally state that the greatest *mevagei'a*, or toilet, in Torah who I saw in my life was Rav Moshe Green. There is simply no comparison. Yes, he was a bright man, but he wasn't a genius. He simply didn't stop learning, and not just learning, but learning in the sense that he invested every ounce of his strength and intellect into understanding a *sevarah*.

Also, one could set their clock by him. He would sit and learn in the *bais medrash* in Skver or at times in his side room, which served as a quasi-office, for hours upon hours with total immersion. He wasn't the type of person who went to take a *drush sefer* out of the bookshelf when he had a couple of minutes waiting for the *rebbe* to finish *davening*. Rather, when he entered the *bais medrash*, he would make a beeline for the *seforim shrank* and take out a *Rishon* or an *Acharon* on the *sugya* being learned in *yeshiva*.

**Can you tell us about the impression this made on you as *bochurim* in the *yeshiva*?**

Let me start with Thursday morning and walk you through the week with Rav Moshe in Skver. On Thursday morning, he gave

what was called his *iyun shiur*, akin to what is called a *shiur klali* in many *yeshivos*. That *shiur* was said every Thursday morning from 8:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and was the culmination of a week's learning. He stayed after the *iyun shiur* for a bit to answer questions, but from Thursday at about 11 a.m., he was already hard at work preparing for the next week's *blatt shiur*, which he said on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday for an hour-and-a-half each day. By Thursday, early afternoon, he was already completely immersed in the next week's *sugya*, even though he didn't have to say a *shiur* for another three days.

**What was the difference between the *blatt shiur* and the *iyun shiur*?**

I would like to tell you something about Rav Moshe Green. There was something constant about his approach to learning. He eschewed superficiality in learning in every sense. ~~The shiurim were products of tremendous yegiah~~ and required tremendous *yegiah* to understand them. The three-times-a-week *blatt shiur* gave us an understanding of the *sugya* in accordance with the basic *Rishonim* and the early *Acharonim*, such as the *Maharsha, Maharam, Pnei Yehoshua* and *Maharam Shiff*, addressing areas of *p'shat*. He taught us the *blatt* in accordance with these *Acharonim*. The *shiur klali* was devoted to *lomdus* of the great *roshei yeshiva*, like his *rebbe*, Rav Reuven, and all of the other *roshei yeshiva* of that generation or the generation that preceded him.

**You said he was like a clock. Can you explain?**

Everything about Rav Moshe was punctual and regimented. He walked into his *blatt shiur* at exactly 11:15 every day and expected us to be prepared. He said the *shiur* for an hour and a half. Then, at 12:45, he was finished. On occasion, when he was in the middle of a *sevarah*, he would beg our indulgence for another couple of minutes to finish. In general, however, he respected both the start and end times of the *shiur*.

**Did he *daven* with the *bochurim*?**

Yes. I knew Rav Moshe for many decades and never saw him come to *daven* after *brachos*. He was always on time and demanded that the *bochurim* come on time as well. Woe to the *bochur* who came late! I remember that the last time he would check to see if a *bochur* was on time was at 7 a.m.

**Seven a.m.?**

That's right! In our days, *brachos* in the *yeshiva* were said at 6:45 a.m., and that was after immersion in the *mikvah*. *Hodu* was at 7 a.m., and right before *Hodu*, he turned around to take a mental picture of the hundred or so *bochurim* who were learning in the *yeshiva* at the time.

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With Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky



After davening, anyone who was not present on time would really get a dressing down from him. If a bocher was a multiple offender, he didn't hesitate to send him home.

Rav Moshe was very demanding. He would stand at the door with a watch at the beginning of morning *sefer* and at the beginning of afternoon *sefer*, and if a bocher was late, he really heard about it.

Rav Moshe was a no-nonsense *rosh yeshiva* who didn't tolerate tardiness and lack of effort, but, even though it was sometimes difficult for us, we had such deep respect for him, because we knew how consistent he was. He never demanded anything from us that he didn't demand from himself.

**Did the rebbe get involved in the yeshiva?**

Not in the day-to-day running of the yeshiva. The rebbe set general policy, but he gave Rav Moshe, the *rosh yeshiva*, and his son-in-law, Rav Itzkiel (current Rachiastrievka Rebbe of Boro Park), the *menahel*, a large measure of autonomy. What I did notice was that Rav Moshe and Rav Itzkiel worked in conjunction with each other, often with Rav Moshe meeting out *middas hadin* and Rav Itzkiel *middas horachamin* in order to bring out the best in the bocharim. In general, the rebbe allowed Rav Moshe to have complete autonomy.

There is one story that I remember in this regard. During the summer, Shabbos ended extremely late in Skver. Until Shabbos ended and we ate *melava malka*, it would be very late at night. As I said, the yeshiva's *Shacharis miyuman* was at 6:45 a.m. That meant that we had to have already been to the *miqvah* before that time. Parenthetically, let me say that in the rebbe's time and even in the earlier years of the present rebbe, it was unusual for a bocher in the yeshiva to get up late and daven in one of the later *miyuman* in the *sibul*. It was an embarrassment. Generally, a bocher who would wake up late would hide in the *etzar noshim* to daven.

Either way, because Shabbos ended so late, the *hanhalah* of the yeshiva was asked if on Sunday mornings, *davening* could begin later than on a regular day. The *hanhalah* decided that our question was one of policy and should be asked to the rebbe. The rebbe didn't answer immediately. A few weeks later, he responded, "Davening may be pushed off fifteen minutes, until 7 a.m., provided that morning *sefer* would begin at 8:30 as it does every day." In other words, *davening* could be delayed if we would shorten breakfast so that it didn't infringe on our learning.

Rav Moshe did tell me that before the rebbe accepted him as *rosh yeshiva*, he stipulated two things that he would immerse in the *miqvah* every day and that, when he was learning in the *beit medrash* with the bocharim, he would wear a *gartel*.

**Did Rav Moshe attend the rebbe's tish?**

He lived in Skver, but he never came to *tish* on Friday night, although he did come on Shabbos morning and on Friday night during Shabbos Chol Hamoed *Penach* and *Sakkas*. Do you know why? Because, aside from those two things that I mentioned that the rebbe asked of him, he also asked for a third thing - that he should serve as *rosh yeshiva* of the Skverer Yeshiva. Rav Moshe felt that he simply needed the time on Friday nights and early Shabbos morning to fulfill his duties as *rosh yeshiva*. He would sit and *horav* in learning on Friday night, preparing his *shiurim*, like he did throughout the week. In those early days of the Skverer Yeshiva, there was no *beis hachinuch* at all. The rebbe didn't hold of *beis hachinuch*. Thus, Rav Moshe would say the *shiur* every day until *Erev Pesach*. The only weeks during which he did not say his regular *shiurim* were the weeks of *Penach* and *Sakkas*. Therefore, going to *tish* on those two *Yomim Tovim* did not conflict with the other task that the rebbe had placed upon him of being *rosh yeshiva*. The rebbe never told him that he had to come to *tish*, but he did tell him that he must serve as *rosh yeshiva*.

**What other things did you learn from the rosh yeshiva as a talmid in the yeshiva?**

Rav Moshe attached the same seriousness to all areas of learning. When he would learn an *aggaleta Gemara*, he learned it with the same *yun* and tenacious desire to understand the point as he did any other *Gemara*. This was a lesson that he taught his *talmidim* by example. There was no such thing as just reading or saying the *Gemara*, and that was very visible in his *talmidim*. They would learn a piece of *Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh* the same way that they learned a piece of *Gemara*. He taught us never to gloss over anything nor fool ourselves when it came to understanding learning.

He also had very clear demands of his *talmidim*. If he would see a *talmid* learning while slouched in a chair, he would stop and say, "Azoi zite men in lernen? Is that how we sit when we learn?"

**What was the yeshiva schedule?**

By 6:45 a.m., we had to be finished with the *miqvah*. *Brachos* was at 6:45, *Hoda* at 7:00, morning *sefer* at 8:30 and *shiur* from 11:15 to 12:45. Then, there was lunch break until 2:15. At 2:15 we began second *sefer*, which lasted until 5 p.m. Rav Moshe was fully in charge of *davening* and the first two main *sedorim*. At 5 p.m., we had *hachar sefer*, which was a *sefer* in the order of *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim*, beginning with the *Tor* and *Bais Yosef* and continuing with the *meforashim*, the *Magen Avraham*, the *Tor*, etc. That *sefer* was led by Rav Itzkiel, the current Rachiastrievka Rebbe of Boro Park. Rav Moshe would leave the *beit medrash* and go to a room in a side room during the two hours of that *sefer*. This was followed by supper and night *sefer*. A really full day!

**How long did Rav Moshe remain in Skver?**

Until the mid-1970s. As the yeshiva grew and began catering to a more diverse clientele, it was time to hire additional *mezugichim*. Rav Moshe had a very strong, uncompromising way of running the yeshiva. With the yeshiva's growth and the emergence of *talmidim* at assorted levels, it became difficult for all of them to follow that path.

**So he was very uncompromising in his demands of the bocharim?**

He was very fair and simultaneously very tough. I remember that once, in the *beit medrash*, he saw a bocher talking *bein gavra* *l'gavra*, between *aliyos* during *laining*. He publicly berated him and wanted him seriously punished. Such an offense was a big deal for him.

**How did he balance learning versus chassidus?**

There was no need to balance. Rav Moshe had no problem with a bocher engaging in *chassidus* as long as he was really learning well, keeping *sefer* and toiling in learning. What Rav Moshe didn't tolerate was someone substituting his learning with *chassidus* and thinking that he was more pious for his efforts.

Rav Moshe was a tremendous *chossid*. He was the *baal tefillah* during the *Yomim Noraim* in Skver for decades, years after he left the yeshiva. His influence on *talmidim* was profound. Some of the most prominent *mechanchim* and *rabbanim* in Skver and beyond are products of his *chiruch*.

Another thing that we learned from him

was his *mesirus nefesh* to learn and give his *shiur*. I remember once, when he had a terrible case of the flu and could barely walk. Still, before *davening*, a car picked him up from his home and drove him to yeshiva, where he insisted on *davening* with the bocharim.

Before the *shiur*, the car again picked him up and, with every bit of strength he could muster, he said his regular *shiur*. This made a great impression on us.

**Did you have a close relationship with him?**

Yes, a very close relationship, although he wasn't the type of *rosh yeshiva* with whom you could just relax and *shomer* about the weather. There was a tremendous *yiras ha-kodesh* in his presence, and yet you knew that he loved you. He and his *rybbetzin* served as the *interior* at my wedding, and the *simcha* with which he danced, and the *passion* in his dancing at my wedding remain forever etched in my memory. He came with his *dekashe* and *gartel* as if he was a family member. After my wedding, too, when I was no longer a *talmid* and did not keep up with him on a regular basis, we would talk occasionally, and he always expressed his love and great interest in my life.

**What happened after he left Skver?**

He continued to live in Skver for several years. After he officially left the yeshiva, he eventually became a *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshiva Bais Dovid in Stolín and perhaps in other places before opening his own yeshiva, Yeshiva D'Monse, where he saw great success. Some of his *talmidim* who live in Brooklyn opened their own *beit medrash* under his leadership as well.

**Did he mellow as he aged?**

I don't know if mellow is the right adjective, but he certainly understood that the generations that evolved as time passed needed a bit of a different approach. Although he remained a very regimented persona and conducted his yeshiva in a regimented way, he was fully mindful of the issues in the 2000s and would advise parents on *chinuch* with cognizance of the allures facing their children.

**Any parting thoughts?**

Rav Moshe's passing is a defining moment. He was almost the last of that great generation of Bais Medrash Elyon *talmidim*. He was a *rebbe* who inspired awe and was a prototype of total consistence, with a drive and love for Hashem and His Torah that were unique. *Chaval al d'avidin*.