

TO BE A BEN



TORAH FOR LIFE

An interview with Harav Aaron Lopiansky

BY RAFAEL HOFFMAN

Harav Aaron Lopiansky serves as Rosh Hayeshivah of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington – Tiferes Gedaliah in Silver Spring, Maryland.

He studied for decades in the Mir Yeshivah in Yerushalayim, forging a close bond with Harav Chaim Shmulevitz, Harav Nachum Partzovitz, and his father-in-law, Harav Benush Finkel, zecher tzaddikim livrachah. The breadth of his approach to many issues in hashkafah was deeply influenced by his long association with Harav Moshe Shapiro, zt”l.

Recently he released a sefer entitled “Orchos Chaim: Ben Torah for Life,” dealing with some of the mounting challenges facing bnei Torah in the workforce. In addition to dealing candidly with many well-known spiritual pitfalls, the sefer provides in-depth discussions and ample source material of broader concepts in hashkafos haTorah, which set forth a path for a ben Torah to not only survive in the post-yeshivah stages of his life, but to continue to grow and thrive. With the examination of topics such as the inherent value of work as a part of enhancing Hashem’s creation, and the broad opportunity for kiddush Hashem in the world, Rav Lopiansky introduces the reader to an approach in avodas Hashem for the working ben Torah. He shares with Inyan some of his thoughts on the sefer and some of the issues it raises.

Those who have learned some of the sefarim quoted in the book might have an idea of the broad opportunities for avodas Hashem after leaving yeshivah, such as the inherent value of honest and professional work and the idea of shifting emphasis to mitzvos when circumstances allow less time for limud haTorah. These topics, so important to an individual once he leaves yeshivah, are rarely, if ever, discussed. Why does the Rosh Yeshivah feel that is so?

Part of the problem comes from a gap in the system that most American *bnei Torah* follow today. If we look back 50 years, [we see that] most people who planted themselves in a yeshivah, either in high school or during their *beis medrash* years, often stayed there through *kollel*. When it came time to move on they remained connected to the *Rebbeim* who had guided them until that point.

Today, many *bachurim* go to Eretz Yisrael after two or



The new sefer from Harav Lopiansky entitled *Orchos Chaim: Ben Torah for Life*

their growth.

There are ways to address this, but the fact is that there has to be a desire on the part of *avreichim* themselves to

three years in *beis medrash* and then come back and go to [Beth Medrash Govoha in] Lakewood. By the time they are ready to leave *kollel* and start what for most *bnei Torah* is the most confusing and challenging time of their lives, many have lost regular contact with their *Rebbeim* from their younger years. As a result there is no system of *shmuessen* or guidance for the post-yeshivah period.

The bulk of *hashkafah* that a *yeshivahman* hears focuses on Torah and maybe a few other aspects of *avodas Hashem* applicable while he is in the *beis medrash*. That is what's appropriate and needed at that stage. Individuals then mostly move on to very large yeshivos where very few have any personal connection to *Rebbeim*. And as their lives progress there is very little continuity in



Rav Lopiansky with brothers-in-law (L-R) Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, *zt"l*, and, *ybl"e*, Rav Binyomin Carlebach and Rav Yisroel Glustein.

have such a concept. Systems adjust to needs.

“Supply and demand” [laws] apply to the world of *ruchniyus* as well.

This was not something done in the past. There never was any major emphasis put on training people to be ehrliche baalei baatim. Why should we need it now?

Chassan classes didn't exist either, but now they're part of the system because there was a need. No one taught *chassanim* how to be a husband, but for the most part [the system] worked. Communities were much stronger and most people's lives were more or less set. The same exposure and choices that existed in more modern times didn't exist. As a result, a lot of the systems we take for granted did not exist.

You can point to many similar concepts. People ask, why didn't we need *mussar* or *Chassidus* 300 years ago? I'm not sure how important the answer is, but what is clear is that when the Baal Shem Tov and Rav Yisrael Salanter came along, *Klal Yisrael* did need them, and both [their] systems played a big role in saving the future of the Jewish people.

The same is true today. It could be that no one ever had to focus on training a Yid how to be an *ehrlliche baal habayis*, but we live in a different world and we have to meet today's many forms of the *yetzer hara*.

Do you think the shmuessen in yeshivos, even if appropriate for the stage of life they are addressing, leave people confused about the totality of hashkafas haTorah on other aspects of life? Does this require adjustment?

Rambam writes in the introduction to *Moreh Nevuchim* that there are seven reasons why people find contradictions [with]in the writings of a particular author. One of them is that when you deal with a complex subject, the right way to present your ideas is to first give an oversimplified overview and then to work on more detailed and nuanced treatments of the same subject. Those two stages do not always match up at face value and people take them to be contradictions.

When a *bachur* is in yeshivah he hears a message of “*Achas shaalti me'eis Hashem ... shivti b'veis Hashem kol yemei chayai*,” and that there's nothing besides the *dalet amos shel halachah*. *Limud haTorah* is your entire world. It's an oversimplification that's appropriate for the *bachur's* level of maturity and for what his task is in yeshivah.

Now if, as he gets older, he learns *sefarim* that discuss *hashkafah* in a sophisticated way, or if he remains connected to a *Rebbi* with whom he feels comfortable discussing real life issues, he'll get the more nuanced picture when he needs it and when he has the capacity to deal with it in a mature fashion.

But what about everybody else? If you don't have either of these it's like giving a *shiur* on the general principles of the 39 *melachos* and never learning the rest of *hilchos Shabbos*. The problem is not what *bachurim* are hearing when they are younger; the problem is that too many of them don't hear much after that, and it leaves them very confused in *avodas Hashem* and in life.

What is the right time for one to learn about the avodah of a working ben Torah?

The concepts can be introduced long before they are practical and in a way that doesn't contradict the basics of what we want of *yeshivah bachurim*.

Now, to tell a *bachur* who is struggling to get himself to sit down and learn about the importance of *avodas Hashem* outside the *beis medrash* obviously doesn't make sense, and it takes a certain amount of grace to know how to plant these seeds.

A lot of what *Mashgichim* and *Roshei Yeshivah* have to focus on is basically getting *bachurim* to behave. But those *shmuessen* can really be an opportunity [to convey] much deeper ideas. Let's say that a group of *bachurim* get a little wild and break something. They certainly need a reprimand. But it's also an opportunity to talk about the idea of destruction and that what Hashem wants is for us to build up the world and not to do the opposite. If *bachurim* make fun of someone, you can talk about the idea of *kvod ha'adam* and

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so on. The point is not only to control the situation, but to plant roots in their minds that can be built on later.

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz's *shmuessen* were very popular and now his *sefarim* are all over, but I remember very well when people used to complain that he didn't speak enough about practical matters like coming to *seider* on time. He spoke about heavy *mussar* concepts and ideas like *nichbadus* and *ohr* versus *choshech*, not how important it was to *daven* in yeshivah. But for anybody who heard those *shmuessen* then, these ideas still resonate with them today. Rav Chaim had a broad outlook ... and understood that he was planting seeds in our minds that would prepare us for life.

Does the lack of incorporation of these concepts in our parlance lead to less than honest practices in business?

Very much so. I remember when there were *ehrlische Yidden*, simple working people, who, whatever they did, had a sense of *kedushah* in the way they did it. I grew up on the Lower East Side, not in a *shtetl*, but there were people who did a job or made a product that had an aura of *sheleimus* to it. They were proud that their products were the best they could be and that their word was something you could trust. They understood what *yashrus* really means and their businesses reflected that.

It's the type of thing that's hard to teach if you don't grow up with a model of what that means, but it doesn't have to be anything as romantic as the village tailor being *mechaven* with every stitch he makes; it can be a lawyer or businessman too. It's important when we see such people that we hold them up as examples for our children from a young age and praise such behavior.

The importance of honesty is something we can teach through the way we ourselves deal with things. I'll give a very practical example. Each state requires a certain amount of driving hours to receive a driving license. In Maryland it's 60, which is a lot. It might be a pain, but this is a law not made by

the czar out of hatred for Jews, and if you tell a kid, "What's the difference?" and just sign off on it, what kind of message is that sending? It's an opportunity to say, "Look, *emes* is *emes* and it's a *middah* of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*." That's a lesson that we hope will shape the rest of his life no matter what he does.

Is there a need for yeshivos to focus more on hashkafos to broaden a talmid's appreciation of the totality of avodas Hashem?

The idea behind karate is that if you focus all of your concentration and strength on one point, you can overcome someone who is much stronger than you. That in a sense has been the approach of the litvishe yeshivos. If the entire focus is on Torah, people will be able to unlock abilities within themselves and achieve things they didn't realize they were capable of. That's the world I came from and I am not looking to take away from that approach, the advantages of which have been well proven.

The chassidische world clearly took a different path and always placed more emphasis on other areas of *avodas Hashem*, so that is reflected in their *chinuch*.

But, the fact is that in both systems there is room for *mechanchim* to slowly map out the broader picture of *Yiddishkeit* so that their *talmidim* will be able to draw on it when they need to.

Most bachurim are inspired by the idea that they might grow up to be great talmidei chachamim, and that helps to power their success in many cases, but it also leads to a great deal of confusion and disappointment when life does not lead them to be that future Rosh Yeshivah. How can yeshivos balance these issues in a way that motivates talmidim, while giving them a healthy perspective on life?

We're used to thinking only about the balance of *bitachon* and *hishtadlus* once a person has to earn a living, but it applies to everything in life, including one's years in yeshivah.

Everyone should go into yeshivah with

the *hishtadlus* it takes to become a tremendous *talmid chacham*. Later on, even if he achieves this goal, there might be things that lead him in a different direction in life. Let's say a person became a big *talmid chacham*, but Hashem didn't give him the wherewithal to teach. One might be drowning in financial needs or burnt out. Whatever it is, he needs to assess what his goal is at this point differently than before.

A person has to be big enough to start to think about what Hashem wants from him at different stages in life. Let's say a person is in *kollel* and he's very serious, but *lo aleinu* he has a family member whom he has to take care of and it takes up a lot of his time. Is he supposed to ask at that point, "What about my plans to become the *Gadol Hador*?"

I lived in Eretz Yisrael for 25 years and my children mostly grew up there. One of my sons had an eighth-grade graduation. There were 120 kids in the grade and a lot of parents were there too, a whole affair with *divrei Torah* and songs and so on. At one point, the *Rebbi* who was the emcee said, "We just got word that one of the *Gedolei Hador* has agreed to grace our *mesibah* with his presence. Will everyone please stand up." Everyone got up, but no one walked in. Then he said that now everyone should sit except the boys from the class, and he proudly announced, "One of these boys is the next *Gadol Hador*."

It was a clever stunt, and I hope it made some of the boys feel good about themselves, but I remember asking myself at the time, "Does this mean that we [will] have 119 failures, and if so, isn't that a pretty bad rate of success?"

Maybe I didn't learn enough, but I don't remember seeing anywhere that a person is supposed to aspire to become the *Gadol Hador*. We have forgotten that being an "*adam gadol*" is a personal quality and one that everyone can and should strive to achieve; being the *Gadol Hador* is only a comparative quality.

Two summers ago in camp a *bachur* asked me how to become a *Rosh Yeshivah*. The first thing I told him was that *harbotzas haTorah* is a wonderful goal, but who said you have to be a *Rosh Yeshivah* to do it? I told him that he should take one boy in his class who is weaker and sit down and learn with him.

My brother-in-law, Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, *zt"l*, gave endless time to the weakest *bachurim* in yeshivah and those were his real *talmidim*, people who were put on their feet only because he cared about them. That's an approach to *harbotzas haTorah* that everybody can do on his own level.

The sefer offers a lot of recommendations for keeping bnei Torah focused on their goals as ovdei Hashem once they enter the workforce. Which does the Rosh Yeshivah feel are the most important external support systems?

If one can find a shul Rav who he feels is a good fit for him and who is willing to give



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him the time and attention he needs, that's a wonderful place to start. We tend to measure the success of a shul — or a yeshivah, for that matter — by its size, but the truth is that effectiveness — measured by actually having an impact on people's lives — maxes out at a certain point.

I have a friend who is a very successful Rav in Baltimore and when there came a need to put up a new building, one of the conditions he made was that it should have no more than 200 seats. He was honest enough to admit that *really* being a Rav for more than 200 families was not something he could do.

Vaadim and *chaburos* with some sort of a leader can give a person a lot of support. It's not always easy, and you have to find a group of people with similar goals in mind. Sometimes it's a night *kollel*, sometimes it's a group that gets together to hear a *shiur* on a regular basis, but as a person moves on in life and meets new challenges, it's important for him to feel connected to something.

Breaking down barriers has always been a challenge of the workplace (especially a non-Jewish one), but the internet has opened up many new pitfalls. Even in a frum office a worker now has easy access not only to inappropriate material, but to news, culture and other things that threaten to tear his mind away from Torah values. People are curious and human. What is the Rosh Yeshivah's advice for working

people to deal with this in a realistic way that preserves their true identities?

First of all, it's important to have times when he draws away totally, not only from technology, but from all the non-Torahdig influences in his life. Shabbos, Yom Tov, vacations, *yarchei kallahs* are all opportunities that, if he allows himself to really disconnect, give a person back a certain amount of his sensitivity.

There are realities of the world we live in that expose anyone in the workplace to a lot more than they used to, but it's important to have some kind of boundary, even if it's small, like saying I'll never look at the *New York Post*, or whatever it is. It reminds you that not everything is *mutar*, you can't just look at and read whatever you want. A person realizes that even if he might allow himself to read certain things, that he's looking at something from outside of his world and that's not really who he is.

Rav Shalom Menashe Gottlieb, *zt"l*, from Beis HaTalmud was once asked to explain how a bunch of wires and poles can make an *eruv*. He said, "[they make] a person feel *fartzoimit* [fenced in]."

In some of the sefer's grittier sections, the Rosh Yeshivah deals with the painful phenomenon of adults becoming estranged from the Yiddishkeit with which they were raised. The internet is widely blamed for this, but the Rosh



Rav Lopiansky with Rav Asher Arieli at a *simchah*.

Yeshivah writes that the problem is much more nuanced and complex. Could the Rosh Yeshivah elaborate a bit on this point?

In the 1960s there was no internet, but there were plenty of really bad things that people got themselves into. Any place that sold magazines had no shortage of lewd material. There were boys who checked into yeshivah in the morning, then disappeared, and came back only at the end of the day.

Internet is where the *yetzer hara* has put in a lot of its efforts in our generation, but problems will always be there. The question to ask is how should a person deal with [each problem] and I think that we have to pay more attention to the roots of the problems we are seeing rather than obsessing about the symptoms or the means.

At a conference I attended, someone mentioned that we have to fight organizations like Footsteps that are trying to pull people away from *Yiddishkeit*. I said, "Fight them? We should copy them."

You have a kid who's on the street for whatever reason. So find a way to give him a warm, loving home. The only difference is that the people who embrace him will have a *yarmulke* and *peyos* and the food will be kosher. We have to ask ourselves, what are these groups doing right and how can we do it? It goes without saying that filters and whatever safeguards a person can put on himself are valuable and important, but *kol koreis* and saying that things are *assur* don't go very far, especially in America.

Another question to ask: If we have many people going away from *Yiddishkeit*, why are their roots so weak in the first place that they can just get blown over?

We tell our children a lot of things that we might think are *mechazek* their *emunah* but far too many of them in the long term do the opposite. When a lawyer gets up in court and says that he has 35 proofs that his client is innocent, he's really hurting his case, because many of them will probably be very weak and when the prosecutor shows that, his whole case will look shaky.

We've learned to tell our children both at home and in the classroom about ideas that are at best oversimplifications. I'll give you an example. You tell a child that before the war in Europe the Yidden in *shtetlach* were *kulo kodesh*. So what's going to happen when he finds out how many were communists, how many were Yiddishists, and so on? Why are we telling stories that are gross exaggerations or just blatantly not true? We have so much in our *mesorah* that is compelling, why should we keep saying *bubbe maasehs* and set ourselves up for cynicism and failure?

Harav Moshe Shapiro's name does not make it into the sefer, but it seems that his depth and breadth resonate in many of its themes. How did the Rosh Yeshivah's connection to him influence his view on these subjects and in general?

He had a tremendous influence on me and definitely taught me to look at the world in a deeper way; that was what Rav Moshe taught everyone. I have to add a caveat: As close as I was to him, there are about 10,000 people who feel they are his *talmidim muvhakim*. In a way they are all right because he was in so many different worlds at once, so I cannot be the definitive word on what Rav Moshe Shapiro was.

In a way that in itself was a big part

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Rav Lopiansky with Harav Moshe Shapiro, zt"l.



IT'S SOMETHING THAT IS BOTH UNIQUE AND INCREDIBLE ABOUT THE MIR, AND IT COMES FROM AN ATTITUDE THAT IF A YESHIVAH IS REALLY ABOUT LIMUD HATORAH, IT CAN BE A PLACE FOR EVERYBODY WHO WANTS TO LEARN.

of what made him so unique. I have a friend whom he told that his job is to open a yeshivah and to say over Torah from all the great *Roshei Yeshivah* of the last generation, to show the full beauty of Torah in all its shades. Another person he told that his place is in academia; and these stories go on and on.

He related to French people and to Russians, to American *baalei teshuvah*, to Chassidim, to old *Yerushalmis*, to everyone. He had a breadth, not just to what he knew but to who he was, that was incredible.

In the last years of his life, his burning issue was the 900,000 Israelis living in *chutz laAretz*, mostly in America, who were becoming totally assimilated. These were not *frum* people, but he felt it was something that no one else cared about and it bothered him to no end. In his last months, he wanted me to go with him to Los Angeles to make an awareness event, but he was not strong enough to go and it never happened.

Rabbi Yehuda Kornfeld [Ed. note: See *Parashas Va'eira*/Jan. 2, 2019 issue of *Inyan*], runs a day school for Israelis in Miami. His basic goal is to give them as much *Yiddishkeit* as he can without being overbearing. When he made the school, he went to Rav Moshe to talk about his plans, and as he got up to go, Rav Moshe stood face to face with him with tears in his eyes and said, "Every day a train left for Auschwitz full of Jewish children. If you are successful and save just one child, I am jealous of your *Gan Eden*."

Rav Moshe Shapiro wasn't an *askan* or a *kiruv* personality. He gave closed-door *chaburos* in the *sefer Etz Chaim* to people who are literally *gedolei mekubalim*, and he gave *iyun shiurim* in *Taharos* to *Roshei Yeshivah*, but this same person was spending his time giving advice as to how this *mechanech* has to make sure that Israeli kids in Miami, very few of whom are even *shomer Shabbos*, are having fun and that they want to keep going back to a Jewish school.

He gave *shiurim* on everything, *nigleh* and *nistar*, and at the same time he cared deeply about Yidden who were so far

away from who he was. It's a real lesson for any *ben Torah*.

The Mir seems unique in that it is very much a Torah-only institution, while allowing bachurim of all sorts and who are headed for all sorts of futures to feel that they are a part of the yeshivah. Does the Rosh Yeshivah think there is something unique to the Mir's hashkafah that has enabled this?

It's something that is both unique and incredible about the Mir, and it comes from an attitude that if a yeshivah is really about *limud haTorah*, it can be a place for everybody who wants to learn.

I came to the Mir straight from RJJ and I was not yet 17 years old. There was an amazing Yid who was part of the yeshivah named Rav Chaim Karniel, who was Rav Nosson Tzvi's *chavrusa* when he first came [to the yeshivah]. He was the definition of what it means to be *kulo Torah*. Every morning he would sit at the breakfast table and ask each *bachur* what his *Rebbi* had said in *shiur* the day before. Every day he would turn to me and ask what Rav Aryeh Finkel, *zt"l*, in whose *shiur* I was at the time, had said.

The first Yom Haatzmaut I was in yeshivah, I was curious to hear what the *Rebbeim* say about it, so I asked Rav Chaim. Without missing a beat, he turned back to me and said, "*Nu, uhn vos hut Reb Aryeh gezogt nechten in shiur?* (What did Reb Aryeh say yesterday in *shiur*?)" The lesson was clear: Politics is an unimportant topic and it's not worth discussing.

This goes on until today, and it takes many forms. Not long ago I spoke to someone from Y.U. who had learned in the Mir. He told me that one time while sitting in the dining room he spoke to another *bachur* for a long time about the *sugya* in *maseches Yevamos* the yeshivah was up to. He told me that at one point it hit him: "I'm an American from Y.U. and this guy is an Israeli from Brachfeld. I'm Askenazic, he's Sephardic; we have absolutely nothing in common except *Yevamos*."

In the Mir they really regarded politics



Rav Lopiansky at an end-of-year *Shabbaton* retreat with the *talmidim*, allowing for reflection on the year that passed and providing inspiration for the future.

as third rate, at best. *Talmud Torah* is something that can include everyone and draws everybody into being part of one thing. That attitude also allowed the yeshivah to adjust to different situations.

During the summer *bein hazmanim*, there were *bachurim* who sat and learned all day and there were others who ran around Eretz Yisrael, a lot of them in places where they should not have been. Rav Nosson Tzvi made a summer schedule, and after morning *sefer* there were buses that took *bachurim* on different trips. There were those who yelled at him and said, “What is this? Camp Mir?” The answer was that this is something this generation needs, and if learning is the purpose of the yeshivah then the only question that matters is, “What can we do to facilitate that?”

Could the Rosh Yeshivah offer some closing thoughts?

The more *bnei Torah* the yeshivos produce, the more they are faced with these challenges when they enter the workforce, and people need to actively seek ways to be *mechazek* themselves.

Each generation has its challenges. The *Rebbeim* of my

generation had to create the concept of “*lomdei Torah*” and build up the yeshivos into places where people could learn Torah in a serious way, and they made a tremendous breakthrough. But the next generation’s challenge is to follow through on that. Their challenge is to take the knowledge and the values they learned in yeshivah and be able to apply them throughout their lives. Someone who comes out of a yeshivah, no matter what he ends up doing in life, needs to understand that being a *ben Torah* is not only about learning, but about all your actions being a result of the *chochmah* you acquired.

What I wrote are only suggestions, examples I have seen work for *talmidim* or others with whom I have dealt. But obviously I can’t know what works for each person. The intention of the *sefer* is to provide some guidance and background and to encourage people to realize that being a *ben Torah* at different stages in life might mean different things, but that’s all the more reason to look for ways to be able to meet that challenge. The true good that will hopefully come out of this *sefer*, *iy”H*, is that it will provoke others to address these issues in many different ways — *u’seshuah b’rov yoetz!* ■