

Feature

by: Bassi Gruen

On the Path to the King

Yaakov Raice grew up as a typical Monsey boy. He davened in Charedim, ate countless lunches at Bubba's Bagels, and was one of the first campers in Camp Fun. After high school, along with thousands of others, he came to learn in Eretz Yisroel. And that was when the search began.

At first he didn't even know what it was he was looking for. But he did know that something was missing in his avodas Hashem. His search led him to chassidus. "When I encountered chassidus," he relates, "it was as though a fire had been ignited within me. I suddenly had a strong drive to become closer to Hashem."

But where does a litvish avreich who wants to grow in chassidus go to learn? The litvish yeshivas have a different focus, while the chassidish ones are simply too big a jump for the neophyte. Yaakov found no place he could call home.

All that changed when Derech HaMelech opened its doors.

Derech HaMelech is an innovative new yeshivah which started this

past Elul. "Derech HaMelech bridges the gap for English-speaking bachurim who want a greater connection to chassidus," says Yaakov. "It is a place for men who are searching, who want to grow"

R' Baruch Gartner, the yeshiva's founder, had been in a similar position when he was a bachur in Eretz Yisroel. He had often experienced deeply moving Shabbosim. He would return to yeshivah full of inspiration, only to feel let down on Sunday. His yeshivah didn't offer the same soul food that nourished him over Shabbos - the excitement of davening, the warmth of chassidus, the focus on the internal aspects of yiddishkeit. And he would wonder - could a place not be created which would offer the joy of such Shabbosim seven days a week?

R' Gartner married and became a skilled and highly sought-after sofer. It was on Shabbos that he would meet them - the Yaakovs, who were asking the same question that had troubled him years before, hungry for a yeshivah which would touch

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Avrechim Yaakov Raice & Yossi Klein

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them on every level. One day, R' Gartner decided to put aside his quill and devote his life to creating living *sifrei Torah*.

R' Gartner garnered the backing of a number of *tzadikim* before setting out to build *Derech HaMelech*. R' Tzvi Meir Zilberberg gave the project his support and *brachah*. He sent R' Gartner across the ocean to involve R' Moshe Weinberger and to observe his *Aish Kodesh* community in Woodmere, NY. It was R' Weinberger who suggested asking Rav Asher Weiss to accept the post of *rosh yeshiva*. To R' Gartner's delight, Rav Weiss accepted.

Finding the students was the easier task. There were so many boys who had been looking for precisely that which R' Gartner had created. They hailed from widely differing backgrounds; *Ashkenazi*, *sephardi*, every stripe of *chassidus*, and every type of head covering. They wore *khakis*, long jackets, and everything in between. One aspect united them all – sincerity.

Yaakov and his long time friend and *chavrusah*, Yoel Klein, were both delighted to become part of the *kollel*. “The atmosphere is very special,” says Yoel. “It’s full of life - the guys are all very involved in their learning. They are also exceptional in their seriousness and motivation.”

Derech HaMelech is a most suitable name for this unique institution. The *Mishnah* speaks of the *derech hamelech*, the path which the king takes. A king and his entourage are allowed to go anywhere they please, breaking down all barriers. *Derech HaMelech* is also breaking down barriers – the barriers which are dividing *klal Yisroel*.

R' Gartner has gathered an impressive staff to meet the needs of the students. The renowned *gaon* and *posek* Harav Asher Weiss gives a weekly *gemara shiur* which is one of the highlights of the week. “Rav Weiss is remarkable in his ability to take very complicated concepts and break them down so that everyone can understand them,” notes Yaakov.

R' Shmuel Rosenbaum serves as *rosh kollel* and gives the highest level *shiur*. R' Rosenbaum studied in *Torah V'daas*, and received *smicha* from R' Elya Chazzan, R' Avrohom Pam, and R' Gedaliah Shorr. He is a respected *posek*, and among his hundreds of former students are numerous *rabbanim*, *poskim* and *dayanim*. He has brought a strong focus on *halacha* into the *yeshiva*. His *shiur* this year worked through *sugyas* from the *gemara* down to modern-day *poskim*. Seeing the full picture lent excitement and relevance to the boys' learning.

The *bachurim* are effusive about their feelings for R' Rosenbaum. “I’ve never enjoyed learning *halacha* so much,” says one of the *talmidim*. “Instead of reading a list of do’s and don’ts, we go through the background so we have the entire picture. *Halacha* also gives you a more active role – going through all the opinions wakes you up, and forces you to use your head. Once the *halacha* is involved, the *gemara* becomes more enjoyable as well, the learning is more alive and becomes part of one’s life. R' Rosenbaum is also highly skilled at building people. I’ve had a tremendous growth in my learning since I came here, mainly because of his encouragement and influence.”

R' Rosenbaum's influence
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reaches far beyond the classroom. “R’ Rosenbaum is my rebbe in every aspect of life,” declares a student. “He is a person of total chessed. I’ve never had anyone in my life help me in so many ways. He helped me through dating, advised me on where to buy jewelry for my kallah, and even washed my tallis!”

R’ Gartner serves as the yeshivah’s mashgiach and gives regular shiurim on Chassidic thought. “He cares about each boy as about a son,” says R’ Rosenbaum. “He can call me at midnight because he’s worrying about one of them. His whole neshama is devoted to the success of the yeshivah.”

“R’ Gartner is an extremely warm and open person,” adds Yaakov. “It’s very easy to talk to him about anything at all.”

There’s a deep camaraderie between the students themselves. “This is the best group of boys I’ve ever learned with,” claims Yaakov. “They are nice, pleasant and normal. They are all striving, but they are also really normal – they are funny and fun.”

R’ Gartner has been astonished to watch Derech HaMelech develop a life of its own. “At first we just had a theoretical blueprint – create a warm yeshivah which focuses on avodos Hashem, and which treats each bachur as an individual. We could only hope it would work. The reality is even better than my original dream.

Building on this year’s success, the yeshivah plans to offer an intensive smicha program this coming Elul. The program, which will be led by R’ Rosenbaum, will span three years—one year devoted to hilchos Shabbos,

one to hilchos kashrus, and a third to family purity, yom tov and miscellaneous halochos. The mornings will be spent learning in-depth the gemaras covering the halachic topics which will be studied in the afternoon. The goal is not to memorize p’sakim, but to understand them from the source, and to give the students the tools to tackle any area of halacha. Practicality will be emphasized – if hilchos esrog is the current topic, esrogim will be brought in for examination, giving the students hands-on experience.

“I feel that a program like this has two major advantages,” says R’ Rosenbaum. “First, analyzing how the Halacha is derived from the original sources helps hone students’ analytical abilities. Second, by bringing learning into the realm of day-to-day living, the students see the relevancy of their learning and this helps them retain what they learn. When I ran a smicha program in another yeshivah, the maggidei shiur told me that the boys in the smicha program were the most motivated in the shiur.”

Derech HaMelech is fertile ground for any program which will bring people to higher levels in their avodos Hashem. “Before the yeshiva came into existence, there were many boys looking for this type of environment,” says Yoel. “Now, they are all gathered together. Derech HaMelech is a beautiful gathering of yearning souls.” ♦

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