

by Binyamin Rose

The state of the nation, when it comes to the yeshivah world, is perhaps in the finest condition it has ever been. Yeshivah enrollment stands at levels unseen since the days of the second Beis HaMikdash, the quality of the education is high, the students who attend and the rebbeim who teach are there because they really want to be there, and even the percentage of children going “off the *derech*” is lower than it was a generation or two ago.

That being the case, why is this generation sounding the alarm bells louder than ever before about children leaving the straight and true path?

“The reason we’re so alarmed today is that the community has grown to such an extent that when we’re talking about even seven or eight percent going off the *derech*, we’re talking about thousands of kids,” says Rabbi Yeraachmiel Milstein, executive vice president of Project Chazon, a New York-based organization that conducts workshops and presentations mainly for yeshivah high school students designed to nip in the bud the urge to stray.

Rabbi Milstein stopped by our offices during his visit to Eretz Yisrael last week. Spending a few hours with him, starting with picking him up in Har Nof early in the morning and spending the next few hours in conversation and meetings, it is easy to appreciate how well-suited he is to the world of outreach, to which he has dedicated the past twenty years. Besides being knowledgeable, he is both at ease and energetic, a skilled communicator, and deeply concerned about *chinuch* and Jewish youth, especially at a time when the phenomenon of at-risk youth is more visible than ever. When children went off the *derech* forty years ago, says Rabbi Milstein, they would disappear from the community and move elsewhere. Out of sight was out of mind. Today, off the *derech* children are able to find like-minded peers more readily and are able to group together and create their own subculture.

This visibility is also enhanced by the establishment of the many worthy institutions to take care of these children and to nurture them back on the path to *avodas Hashem*. “I know that there are some people who get upset when we create an institution for these kids because they feel that it’s actually promoting this kind of lifestyle. My feeling is that it’s a miserable lifestyle. Most of these kids who have gone off the *derech* are unhappy. No one would deliberately choose this lifestyle,” says Rabbi Milstein.

SIMPLE PLEASURES One of the secrets of staying on the *derech* is gaining an appreciation of what is unique about being a Jew and the happiness and joy one can get from having the privilege to learn G-d’s Torah and perform His mitzvos every day. This is no simple matter, says Rabbi Milstein. Fear of Hashem and love of Hashem are two of the six constant mitzvos that we are commanded to observe. The very fact that Hashem had to command us to do them is proof positive that it is something that requires work. After all, fear and love are ▶▶

COUNTING OUR Blessings

Staying “on the derech” and working on our relationship with Hashem takes contemplation, study, and hard work but the rewards can be immeasurable. How can we attain these goals and most importantly, pass them on to our children?



emotions. How does the Almighty emotionally obligate someone who He has created and endowed with free will? Obviously, it must be something we are capable of achieving.

Rabbi Milstein contends that if we would only take note of everything that Hashem does for us on an everyday basis; if we would only count our blessings all the time, then the feeling of love for Hashem would flow automatically. "You can start by thinking how the human eye can see literally millions of colors while other mammals are essentially color blind," says Rabbi Milstein.

While the written Torah consists mainly of the 613 mitzvos interspersed with the stories of our forefathers and the first 2,488 years of human history, it also enumerates the three occasions in the desert when Hashem commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to count the Jews. Moshe Rabbeinu, says Rabbi Milstein, is an elderly man, yet Hashem seemingly troubles him to perform the census in the most inconvenient way possible, by physically going from tent to tent. Is Moshe Rabbeinu a human calculator? Does HaKadosh Baruch Hu need a human being, even if it is His faithful shepherd, to count the Jews for Him?

"HaKadosh Baruch Hu's blessing is *klal Yisrael* and Hashem is counting His blessings all the time," says Rabbi Milstein, noting the powerful lesson for us. "Making an effort of noting your blessings in life is what's going to make you a happy person."

Isn't it difficult to convey this concept, especially to young people? You're expecting them to appreciate simple pleasures in a generation that has been brought up on luxuries, or where they are at least attainable. Where is the enjoyment in this?

Rabbi Milstein: "First, we show a child there are simpler pleasures in life and then there are higher and more sophisticated ones. The simpler pleasures don't require a lot of effort. They are easier to find and you can appreciate them with one of your five senses. The problem with the simple pleasures is that if you indulge in them without any sort of self-control, it is not only bad for your soul, but it's bad for your body as well. If someone likes chocolate brownies but gets locked into a roomful of chocolate brownies for a week, then the pleasure goes out of it and it becomes repulsive."

What are the sophisticated pleasures you speak of?

"*Ahavah*, for example. *Ahavah* is an emotional pleasure which is far superior to

simple pleasures. It could be the *ahavah* between a husband and wife, or between parents and children, or especially between friends, which is something that young people can really appreciate. It's a very high pleasure."

Accordingly, once a person begins to understand human relationships and the pleasures they can bring, that person can then come to understand the concept of a relationship with Hashem. Just as a person normally tries not to offend a spouse, parent, or friend, one would naturally become more careful about harming their relationship with Hashem. Yet sometimes, we are careless with our relationships. Or, at times, there is the natural human tendency to rebel against authority, whether that authority is a parent, boss, or the Creator. I asked Rabbi Milstein how he parallels the relationship between a parent and a child, to the relationship between a youngster and HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and what we can learn from it.

"Authority is authority," says Rabbi Milstein. "If, for example, a kid suffered a trauma or loss in their family and doesn't have any answers for it, his responses will vary. Some won't act out against Hashem but they may become difficult in school. Or a more typical case is that they won't lash out at their parents, but they will lash out against G-d, because they noticed that the last time they saw someone do an *aveirah* they weren't stricken down on the spot."

Rabbi Milstein cautions against laying blame exclusively on the parents for a child that has strayed from the path. He says the assumption that the parents may have been too heavy-handed with the child is often faulty, as sometimes a family with thirteen children, many of whom have become *roshei kollel* and *mashgichim*, do have trouble with one, and only one child.

"So if you see that your methods are working with your other kids, you can't really blame yourself. It's really very complex why one kid might go off the *derech* while other siblings don't."

WARNING SIGNS If seven or eight percent of religious kids today are going off the *derech*, that means that ninety-two to ninety-three percent are staying on the path. Rabbi Milstein contends that children, by and large, are happy. But when we see kids who are not, it is very important to try and figure out what's going on. The first item on a parent's checklist should be to ensure that they are giving plenty of love. "Nothing is more effective than love," he says.

Citing a recent study that parents actually, and mainly unintentionally, criticize

their children forty times more often than complimenting them, Rabbi Milstein says that parents do need to examine their parenting style. "I never met a kid with lousy self-esteem who went on to be great."

After the self-examination, if the parents have determined that the love and the positive reinforcement is there but the happiness is still missing, then he would advise them to check for learning disabilities or a trauma that the parent wasn't aware of.

"Let's get away from fault and blame," says Rabbi Milstein. "Some kids are prone



to problems. Many kids have been diagnosed with a whole host of learning disabilities and behavioral problems. There are many kids on Ritalin. Kids can be hyperactive, especially those brought up on TV. Kids have psychological problems.

"That's what the kids bring to the table. What can we do? We are the *mechanchim*. We have to see what we can do to help. In general, love is very important, so is acceptance, and building self-esteem might be the panacea for all kids."

Self-esteem and maturity go hand-in-hand. It means teaching the child to forgo immediate gratification, which is something that every mature adult has to do. "At some point, we all have to give up the jelly beans to keep our weight under control and keep our teeth. Self-es-

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teem is about being meaningful and doing the right thing. When a kid who is on the verge of becoming an adult feels terrific about himself, he does the right thing."

Once self esteem is built, how is it put into action?

"The next level is what we call self-actualization pleasures. Each person is unique and has a certain destiny for greatness. It is attainable through Torah and mitzvos. To the extent that we make great sacrifices and work very hard we can attain it on our own. Sometimes people are totally ignorant of this and lead a life that's less fulfilling and then Hashem may bring a tremendous challenge. Our reaction to that challenge can be how we realize our greatness." >>>

ABOUT RABBI YERACHMIEL MILSTEIN

Saying he finds himself parked at the intersection of the outreach and yeshivah world, Rabbi Yerachmiel Milstein relates how HaKadosh Baruch Hu brought him into the kiruv profession some twenty years ago. Rabbi Motti Berger from Aish HaTorah had arrived in America to gather support for Aish HaTorah's Discovery program.

Rabbi Milstein attended his lecture with a friend, Rabbi Yaakov Salomon, who today is Project Chazon's clinical supervisor. "We challenged him and gave him a hard time. He asked us to come and meet with him, which we did and let's just say, we lost the argument," says Rabbi Milstein.

What was the argument about? "That on the basis of some entertaining quips and some truly astounding insights that you could change somebody and change yourself," says Rabbi Milstein. "I couldn't believe *emes*, presented in a sound bite fashion, could help anyone but I learned that it can get you on the path of examining your own values."

What did you learn personally from it?

"For the first time in my life, I examined my own *frumkeit* and realized that I needed to cogently express what being a Jew is about and what *avodas Hashem* really is."

During the subsequent years, Rabbi Milstein has become a high demand outreach lecturer. He was a senior lecturer for Aish HaTorah's Discovery seminars for the past nineteen years; he has appeared before tens of thousands of people throughout North America, Israel, Europe, and South Africa. Once a week, he works at The Yatzkan Center, an inpatient rehabilitation center for religious youth in Mt. Vernon, New York which helps put youth back on track and back in the yeshivah world; at Home Sweet Home for *frum* youth who are unable to live at home, and privately counsels about 100 kids a year who are

at-risk of being dismissed from yeshivos.

In the last couple of weeks, Rabbi Milstein has taken on another position — host of the new Mishpacha radio hour aired Thursday nights at 10 p.m. EDT on WSNR 620 AM.

Why did he decide to fit Mishpacha into his already full schedule?

"I think that what's sorely lacking today is *achdus*. We are living at a time where many of us witness the splintering of community over turf and policy. While we can apply the dictum that "this and that are the words of the Living G-d," there is still a tremendous shortage of *achdus*. It is *achdus* that will clearly bring about the Geulah.

"When I look at Mishpacha magazine, it screams off every page that we're one community and we don't take a party line on anything. Sometimes, you will take a story of a secular person who's doing something good for the community while at the same time you honor the *gedolim* tremendously.

"The radio program also gives me a platform to share my insights on *chinuch* and parenting which I think are extremely critical issues. There is nothing more important than them."

Can you give us some concrete examples?

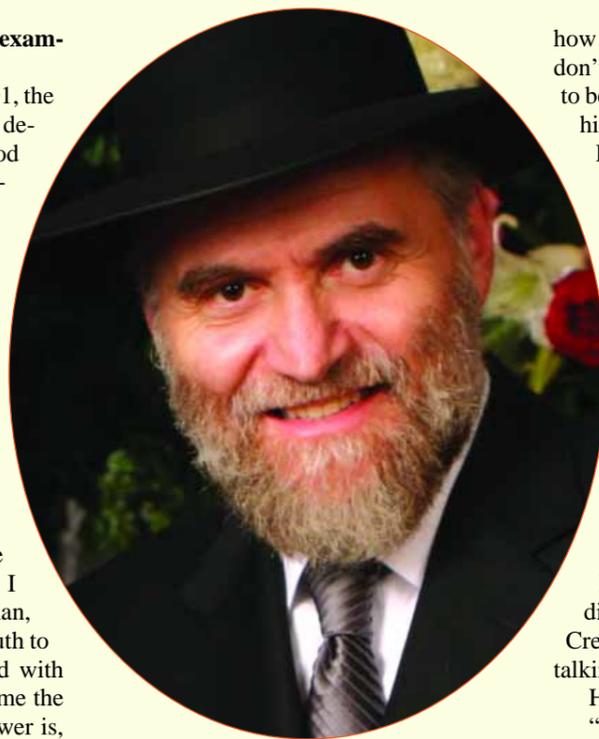
“In New York City, prior to 2001, the city had a police force and a fire department. They were basically good people but their most important decisions were often what brand of beer to buy for the tailgate party. Then came 9/11. They had to decide on that day if they were going to be great or run from that greatness.

“President Bush is another example. Before he was elected president, the Democrats were getting desperate, so they put out a campaign advertisement that Bush was once an alcoholic and had been arrested for driving while under the influence of alcohol. So I started thinking, how did this man, born with a silver spoon in his mouth to a Texas oil millionaire, and faced with the challenge of alcoholism, become the leader of the free world? The answer is, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps and in the process built the character that enabled him to become leader of the free world.”

How applicable are the experiences of New York City police and firemen and the president, to today’s yeshivah youth?

“The greatness we see in the non-Jewish world is just the first level that we spoke about earlier, the levels of physical pleasure and the outer trappings. We have a richer and greater heritage to tap into. It means going somewhere no one else has ever been or doing something that no one has done before. If you see a neighbor who is depressed and you say good morning with a huge smile on your face for forty days, and lift someone up and do an act of kindness, and you change that person—that’s greatness. If you improve yourself and advance to a higher level, that’s also greatness. Greatness to us is using the strength that Hashem gave us.”

REDUCING RISK It’s been at least ten years since articles in the Jewish media began to make the community aware of the problems of at-risk youth. Many worthy organizations have been formed and are working hard in areas of intervention, social services, and personal mentoring. Project Chazon also opened its doors at the same time, founded by Rabbi Daniel Mechanic who received *smichah* from Rav Avrohom Pam *ztz”l* at Yeshivah Torah Vodaath, and was former director of Aish HaTorah’s Discovery program. About three years after he formed Project Chazon, Rabbi Mechanic asked Rabbi



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Milstein to join him. Rabbi Milstein had a similar background, having studied at Yeshivas Mir Jerusalem and having received rabbinical ordination from Mesivta Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City. Project Chazon now conducts some 300 programs a year in 230 schools throughout the United States, Canada, and England and has reached some 30,000 yeshivah students through its various seminars.

The seminars focus on “preventive maintenance.” Just as one might visit their doctor for a physical exam once a year and take their automobile for scheduled maintenance to keep it running at peak efficiency, Rabbi Mechanic and Rabbi Milstein found that the soul needs an occasional tune-up as well.

“In the yeshivos, we teach a lot about Abaye and Rava. We teach a lot about halachah but in terms of teaching about *hashkafah*, for many of us it begins and ends in kindergarten with the song ‘Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is everywhere.’ It’s a great song and it teaches yiras Hashem, but some-

how when text-based study begins we don’t have the time or the focus anymore to be able to continue to teach a kid what his relationship with Hashem is,” says Rabbi Milstein.

It is this niche that Rabbi Mechanic and Rabbi Milstein have chosen to fill. Seminar topics focus on ones that youngsters struggle with the most, such as how to connect to Hashem through tefillah. Davening is a requirement three times a day for men and just like anything we do often, sometimes we tend to do it by rote, mumbling the words, or rushing to keep pace with the congregation, or sometimes even faking it. Says Rabbi Milstein: “There is nothing more indicative of your relationship with the Creator of the World as when you’re talking to Him.”

Here, there are no easy answers.

“The word for davening is *hispallel*,” says Rabbi Milstein. “This is a reflexive verb relating directly to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Davening is clearly not about notifying G-d of your laundry list of needs. He knows what you need better than we do. If someone has a dim view of his relationship with Hashem, then tefillah becomes a big chore and becomes very, very difficult.”

Project Chazon also offers lectures on why we were created, designed to give a child the ability to understand their Yiddishkeit in context of both *hashkafah* and mitzvah observance and last but not least, to convey the relevancy of the Torah and that it is absolutely true.

This question begs asking. The Jews witnessed the parting of the Red Sea and almost immediately complained they had no water to drink. The Jews saw open miracles when the Torah was given on Mt. Sinai and forty days later made a Golden Calf. If such a generation strayed at times, what sort of long-range impact do you honestly feel your seminars can have?

“That’s an excellent point. Because it’s not just intellectual and this is where building *ahavas Hashem* becomes extraordinarily critical. Jews must have *emunah* and *bitachon*. There are many opinions as to what this means, but from a practical perspective, *emunah* comes from the root of amen, which is the intellectual integrity of knowing that the Torah is truth. *Bitachon*, in modern Hebrew, means security and in our terms, it means knowing that even when the chips are down we can live with things just as they are.” ■