

Taking The Aspirin before PROJECT CHAZON

by Malki Lowinger

“Why are we *frum*?”

This is the question that the man in the front of the room is asking about 200 Bais Yaakov girls in their high school gym.

The girls begin to giggle. Some of them start to fidget. Is he serious? What kind of question is that? We’ve all been through the yeshivah system. We know every Rashi and every halachah we’ve ever learned. We even have a *shmiras halashon* campaign in our school. What does he mean, why are we *frum*? We’re *frum* because ... because”

“Because our parents are *frum*,” ventures one young lady.

“Because this is how we always lived,” says another girl.

“Because it’s the truth,” says a third.

Thus begins an interactive, mind-enhancing session that may very well turn into a life-transforming experience for many of the youngsters who are listening. Three hours later, these girls are still riveted to every word that this presenter says. They’re discussing issues of faith,



Torah from Sinai, the Oral Torah, life and death, free will, tefillah, pain and suffering, and the way to lead a truly meaningful life. They’re laughing and sobbing, listening and participating. They’re internalizing every word. They’re part of the over 100,000 students in 212 yeshivahs and Bais Yaakov high schools who have merited to become a part of this very unique program, presented by an organization that called Project Chazon.

Project Chazon was founded by Rabbi Daniel Mechanic, nine years ago, to fill a need. Rabbi Mechanic’s logic was

simple. Why spend millions of dollars, not to mention the immeasurable anguish and grief, trying to rehabilitate our unfortunate children who have strayed from the *derech*? Instead, let’s take preventative measures. Let’s prevent our mainstream kids from losing their *hashkofos*.

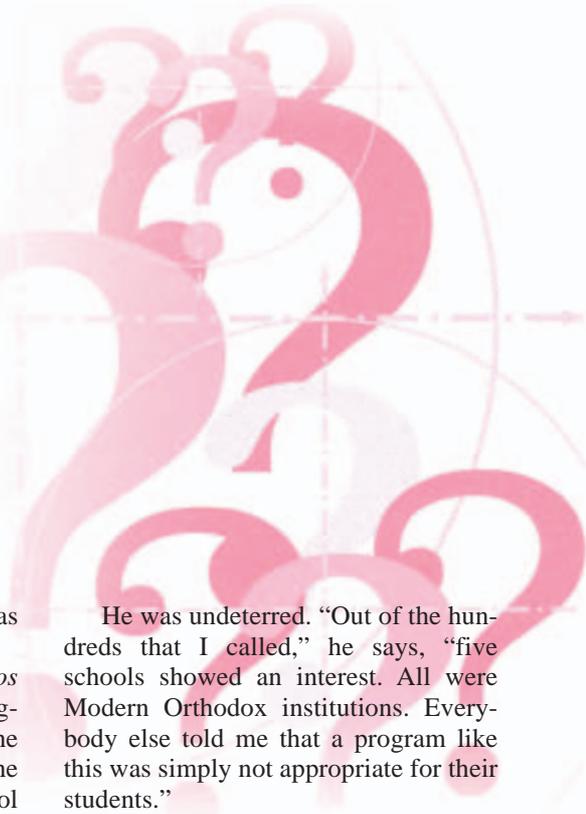
Let’s make sure they remain rooted to Yiddishkeit in the first place. As Rabbi Mechanic likes to say, “Let’s inoculate them with a good dose of Yiddishkeit. Let’s give them the aspirin before the headache even begins.”

Rabbi Mechanic had not been especially interested in entering the field of teenage *chinuch*. His career was headed in an entirely different direction. A *talmid* of Yeshivas Kol Torah, Yeshivas Gedolah of Passaic, and Yeshivas Torah V’Daas, Daniel Mechanic was a young and aspiring *bochur*. In 1981, he was approached by Rabbi Noach Weinberg of Aish HaTorah and asked if he would consider becoming a kiruv professional. Trained by Aish, he spent the next fifteen years working in *kiruv rechokim*,



The executive director of Project Chazon, Rabbi Daniel Mechanic, capturing the attention of Long Island high schoolers

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including the presentation of hundreds of Discovery seminars, and helping to create hundreds, even thousands, of *baalei teshuvah*.

The world of kiruv was thrilling enough for Rabbi Mechanic; he certainly wasn't contemplating a career change. But as his work with *baalei teshuvah* was becoming more and more successful, there was another issue which was becoming more and more disturbing. Rabbi Mechanic began to receive phone calls, many of them, from distraught and desperate *frum* parents who were trying to deal with children who were going off the *derech* or whose Yiddishkeit was faltering. They heard about how Rabbi Daniel Mechanic could change the life of a secular Jew. Perhaps he could do the same with their own Avi, Etti, or Shloimie.

"That's when I decided to shift the emphasis of my life," says Rabbi Mechanic, "from *kiruv rechokim* to *kiruv kerovim*". Rabbi Mechanic figured that the same persuasive skills and intelligent reasoning which he used in his presentations for Discovery and Aish could work wonders, with some modification,

in the yeshivah high school setting as well.

Rabbi Mechanic received *haskamos* from many *gedolei Torah*, who recognized the need for strengthening the *hashkafos* and foundations of faith in the yeshivah, Bais Yaakov, and day school system. Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, Rav Mattisyahu Salomon, *shlita*, Rav Aharon Schechter, *shlita*, the Novominsker Rebbe, *shlita*, and Rav Avraham Chaim Levine, *shlita* are among those who gave him their wholehearted approval.

Armed with a Torah Umesorah listing of all the yeshivos, Bais Yaakovs, and day schools in America, Rabbi Mechanic got to work. He called every one of them, explained his concept, and offered to present their students with a strong spiritual and intellectual foundation in faith and *hashkafah*. He told them that he could strengthen the *hashkafos* of even the most solidly committed students and reassure and encourage those who had questions or doubts. Their response? According to Rabbi Mechanic, "The schools were absolutely not interested."

He was undeterred. "Out of the hundreds that I called," he says, "five schools showed an interest. All were Modern Orthodox institutions. Everybody else told me that a program like this was simply not appropriate for their students."

Nine years later, ninety-nine percent of these schools have changed their minds. Project Chazon lectures are so effective and so powerful that they are being presented in virtually every mainstream Bais Yaakov, just about every top yeshivah, and a significant number of chassidic institutions as well. Rabbi Mechanic and his partner, the renowned lecturer and educator Rabbi Yerachmiel Milstein, have traveled across the country and around the world delivering their lectures and spreading the word. They are probably the most sought-after speakers on the high school and mesivta circuit. And the feedback that they have been receiving is evidence of their tremendous success.

The creators of Project Chazon are quick to point out that the success of their program in no way indicates any kind of a failure or void in the main- ►►



Rabbi Yerachmiel Milstein of Project Chazon lectures budding talmidei chachomim in Manchester, England.

stream yeshivah curriculum. "The yeshivos are doing a tremendous job," Rabbi Mechanic says. "Both in quality and in quantity, they are producing outstanding *bonei Torah* and *bnos Yisrael*."

But even as the yeshivah system is striving towards perfection, the negative forces that swirl around us are increasing their influences as well. The challenges that are facing our children are overwhelming. The trials of modern technology and the lure of the outside world are just too much to bear. As many astute educators put it, "It's not easy being a kid these days."

When one needs a doctor, *chas v'shalom*, for a specific problem, one calls a specialist. And when you need to address these overwhelming issues, you call in the specialists who are equipped to deal with these things. Rabbis Mechanic and Milstein (and Mrs. Gila Manolson, and Mrs. Chana Kalsmith, two more outstanding lecturers for Project Chazon) are specialists in the field of *hashkafah*. Their straightforward logic, sincerity, easygoing manner, and self-assurance are irresistible. Children develop an instinctive trust for them. Before long they are drinking in every word.

Rabbi Milstein explains it this way: "When you learn a lot of halachah and Gemara you may tend to disassociate it from your personal life. You can be the biggest *masmid* in yeshivah, but that won't necessarily mean that your level of faith and *bitachon* is where it should be. We provide an anchor for these kids. We teach them that learning is all about relating to Hashem. You use your anchor to create a personal connection with HaKadosh Baruch Hu."

Because of the open and interactive nature of their presentation, these rabbis have to be ready for anything. All kinds of unusual and interesting questions come pouring out. Questions that were bottled up inside these youngsters for

years. Why did the Holocaust happen? How do we know our way of life is right? Why are my tefillos not being answered? Why should we keep the laws of modesty? And here's a good one - How do we have free will if Hashem already knows what we are going to do?

While many of us would have a difficult time answering these questions, nothing fazes Rabbis Mechanic and Milstein. In fact, they love it when the questions are challenging or demanding. It means that the children are really thinking. And they're expressing the

emotions that are stored deep in their hearts.

Consider this letter from a grateful Bais Yaakov girl: "On behalf of my classmates, I thank you for one of the most inspiring presentations I have ever heard. Very infrequently has anyone in the Jewish world spoken to us as directly as you have. There is a fair amount of insecurity in our grade - about religion, about Hashem, about life, history, and the world at present. Most of these feelings have been hushed up, one way or another. People like you serve a real purpose in the *frum* world, for though you say your intent is to teach us how to respond to others, it is many of us that you are teaching to believe. I think that directly resulting from your presentation, each of us have become firmer be-

lievers in G-d and the Jewish religion. Never before have I seen so many kids so enthusiastic about Yiddishkeit as there were after you had spoken."

Rabbi Milstein remembers one young lady seriously asking why suicide is forbidden. ("It was quite shocking," he says. "But we made a referral and were able to help her work through her problems.") Rabbi Mechanic remembers another young lady who burst into tears at the end of his presentation. She confessed to being *mechallel Shabbos* because she wore makeup on Shabbos. Rabbi Mechanic dealt with this in his usual sensitive and skillful manner.

And when a student's issues become too much for a simple lecture to handle, Project Chazon is there for them as well. Student counseling is a major part of their program. Rabbis Mechanic and Milstein are often called by students who heard their presentation five or six years ago and are now in trouble or standing at the edge of the abyss. They remember the sincerity and truthfulness of these rabbis. They remember their non-judgmental approach. And they reach out to them for help.

Young people can sense dishonesty and hypocrisy, a mile away. They know when someone is trying to win them over with platitudes and meaningless pontification. They also know when they are being addressed with warmth and respect. And that's what they feel when they are listening to the presenters of Project Chazon. Because, after all the lectures, the theories, the humor, the perspectives, even the arguments, it's the love that comes through. After all the *chizuk* and the inspiration, it's the *ahavas Yisrael* that makes the greatest impression. This is what captures the hearts of the *metzuyonim* in yeshivah as well as the youth on the street. As Rabbi Milstein likes to say, "It's all about love. You simply gotta love them." ■

