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Heartfelt.

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Chinuch With Heart

*Rabbi Shimon Finkelman
Rebbi, Yeshiva Darchei Torah*

It Begins at the Top

Any first-time visitor to the campus of Yeshiva Darchei Torah cannot fail to be impressed. On a sprawling eight-and-a-half acre property sits the Yeshiva's magnificent, state-of-the-art building that houses the preschool through middle school; the impressive edifice of Mesivta Chaim Shlomo, Bais Medrash Heichal Dovid and Kollel Tirtza Devorah; a separate structure housing the newly renovated mesivta beis medrash, gymnasium and vocational center; baseball fields, basketball courts, playing and climbing areas for younger children; and parking lots.





Our

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But as the Mishnah states: "Do not look at the jug but rather, at what it contains" (Avos 4:20). One has only to walk the halls of the Yeshiva – in any division – to see happy students, children and bachurim who are growing in their respective studies and developing into well-rounded, well-adjusted bnei Torah who will be an asset to their communities and a pride to the Jewish people.

And one will notice something else. In a yeshiva whose student enrollment baruch Hashem exceeds 2,000, there is a warm, family-type atmosphere. How can this be? How does this multi-faceted institution maintain a close-knit feeling?

Anyone associated with Darchei Torah will tell you: It begins at the top. Rabbi Yaakov Bender is a warm, sincere, caring and upbeat individual who has his finger on the pulse of every one of the Yeshiva's classes.

Rabbi Bender visits the preschool each week to teach the kindergarten children the aleph-beis while using the opportunity to impart important lessons about Torah and Middos (*ches* stands for chesed, for example). He delivers a monthly shmuess on the parshah to the elementary grades, and separate weekly shmuessen

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to the middle school and to the mesivta and beis medrash. Advanced talmidim in 10th and 11th grades attend Rabbi Bender's weekly Gemara shiur, and the *yungeleit* of the Kollel attend a bi-weekly *vaad* on *chinuch* and *shalom bayis*.

More incredible are Rabbi Bender's weekly visits to all classes from sixth through twelfth grade during which he returns and signs all limudei kodesh test papers. The few moments that he spends with each talmid gives Rabbi Bender an opportunity to connect with him, encourage him, and develop a relationship with him.

A Parent's Gratitude

Lest anyone think that this is not significant, read the following excerpt from a letter to Mishpacha magazine submitted by a Darchei parent:

"My son is a quiet young man with few words to say. Not much seems to inspire him either. The other day he came into the car at dismissal from school and I noticed that his eyes were lit up ... The Rosh HaYeshiva had come into the classrooms to give back the test papers ... [My son related:] 'When Rabbi Bender returned my tests, he said...'"



"It was a small compliment, not much, yet it seemed to give more energy that night to my son. He studied a little harder that night, and it was easier to wake him for Shacharis the next morning.

"Thank you, Rabbi Bender."

A Stellar Makom Torah

At the chanukas habayis celebration of the elementary school building in 2011, the Novominsker Rebbe declared that the special siyata diShmaya that Rabbi Bender has merited in developing a world-class mosad haTorah is testimony to the fact that Hashem helps those who care for His people. Darchei Torah is renowned for its high standard of academic excellence both in limudei kodesh and secular studies. The majority of its mesivta and beis medrash talmidim continue their learning at renowned yeshivos in Eretz Yisrael. Upon returning to the States, talmidim continue their learning at Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood or return to Darchei's Kollel Tirtza Devorah which currently has 30 full-time *yungeleit* and 30 part-time members.

The Yeshiva's alumni include scores of outstanding talmidei chachamim, many of whom are successful mechanchim and maggidei shiur; and businessmen and professionals who are defined by their commitment to Torah learning and ideals. The general studies program is renowned for its high caliber, and its students have won international science

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competitions. And along with his emphasis on educational excellence, Rabbi Bender has never neglected students who are academically challenged or physically handicapped.

Darchei's Weiss Vocational Center has granted confidence and success to those students who need a streamlined curriculum while learning a vocation that they can use later in life as a means of earning a livelihood.

Over the years, Rabbi Bender has accepted into the Yeshiva a number of physically and mentally handicapped children, some from out of the Far Rockaway/Five Towns area, who were not successful in other yeshivos. These boys have thrived at Darchei, where Rabbi Bender's compassion and respect for every type of child filters down to the talmidim. It is not uncommon for one such child to be sitting in a "seat of honor" alongside the podium as Rabbi Bender delivers his weekly shmues. And not surprisingly, it is not uncommon to see a talmid pushing the wheelchair of a handicapped boy on the way to minyan or lunch.

As Rabbi Bender often notes, when a handicapped child is accepted into the Yeshiva, it is often his classmates who gain the most. By assisting this child, including him in activities to whatever degree is possible, and

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taking note of how he deals with his challenges, they develop a sense of compassion and responsibility that will make them better human beings for the rest of their lives.

For Klal Yisrael

The saying goes that a busy person somehow makes time for everything. Rabbi Bender certainly epitomizes this concept. Although his overriding priority is directing his own mosad, he is at the same time deeply involved with Klal Yisrael, both on a communal and individual level.

This past summer he was asked to join the Vaad Roshei Yeshivos of Torah Umesorah, but well before that, he was often called upon to participate in Torah Umesorah's many programs for mechanchim. In the words of Rabbi Zvi Bloom, Executive Director of Torah Umesorah and a talmid of Rabbi Bender:

"Rabbi Bender has always made himself available whenever we have called upon him to participate in training programs for rebbeim, menahalim, and mashgichim. He simply never says 'No,' though he is one the busiest people I have ever met.



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"At our annual convention, we offer mechanchim the opportunity to sign up for one-on-one meetings with roshei yeshiva and menaholim. Always, Rabbi Bender's calendar fills up very quickly, and for those three days, he is meeting privately with someone at every available moment. That's because everyone recognizes the love and concern that he feels for every Jewish child."

Rabbi Bender's father, Harav Dovid Bender zt"l, passed away when Rabbi Bender was a bachur of 15. Having experienced what it means to be orphaned, he has made it his mission to lend strength to those in similar circumstances. Rabbi Bender is deeply involved with the Samcheinu organization for widows; Shlomie's Club for yesomim; and Links for yesomos.

A spokesman for Sister-to-Sister, an organization for divorcees, related: "Every week Rabbi Bender takes a break from his busy schedule to record a targeted message on the weekly parashah to strengthen these women in their sacred role of being mechanech their children. Over a thousand women are touched by his kindness when they hear his recording each week. In addition, Rabbi Bender attends an annual weekend for Sister-to-Sister women. From the moment he arrives until the moment that he leaves, for hours and hours on end, he speaks, guides, listens to and strengthens individual women."



As a rebbi in Darchei Torah, I have been attending the Yeshiva's annual dinner for over 20 years. I cannot forget a story told by an honoree at the very first dinner I attended, because it made me feel so fortunate to be working for Rabbi Yaakov Bender.

A woman in a very difficult marriage had been forced to leave her house with her children and move into a furnished apartment. The kitchen cupboards and refrigerator were empty – literally.

This honoree was in conversation with Rabbi Bender in his yeshiva office when Rabbi Bender summoned Mr. Torres, who was the school custodian at that time. He gave Mr. Torres money and a detailed grocery list, along with the woman's new address, and instructed him to purchase the items and deliver them.

Mr. Torres left on his mission and Rabbi Bender resumed his conversation with the honoree. Around a half-hour later, Rabbi Bender called Mr. Torres on his cellphone. After ascertaining that the groceries had been purchased, Rabbi Bender said, "Mr. Torres, please find the cookies and put them at the very top of one of the bags. I want the children to be able to have some cookies as soon as the groceries arrive."

That is Rabbi Bender, the man who is always thinking about everyone else. 🌍



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Every parent glows with joy when his children succeed, and all the more so when they remain firmly within the family orbit. The Rosh HaYeshiva, Rav Yaakov Bender, is no different: When he walks into the bais medrash and kollel, and sees how his “children” – talmidim – have grown, his heart swells.







1979



1996



2001

"It's such an incredible nachas for me, to see the amazing energy and hasmadah of our yungeleit," he says.

Darchei talmidim have a certain shleimus, a balance. They leave the Yeshiva with a focus on learning, but they are also distinguished by exceptional middos and a strong sense of chesed. The Yeshiva's emphasis on inclusion and working to reach each boy at his level produces a yeshiva-wide spirit of growth, and a positive feeling so strong, visitors sense it the minute they step onto the campus.

Founded as a community yeshiva, and shaped by the vision of Rabbi Yaakov Bender, Darchei Torah has never lost sight of the fact that community means everybody. Every person has something to contribute; the beauty of the tapestry comes from weaving in threads of all colors and textures. Today, Darchei has the distinction of being one of America's largest yeshivos, and due to its excellence in creating lamdanim and ba'alei middos, it serves as a model for yeshivos worldwide.

Yeshiva Darchei Torah was the brainchild of R' Yisroel Bloom a"h, who lived in Far Rockaway at a time when there were no elementary yeshivos located in that neighborhood. When his first son was born, Reb Yisroel

1972

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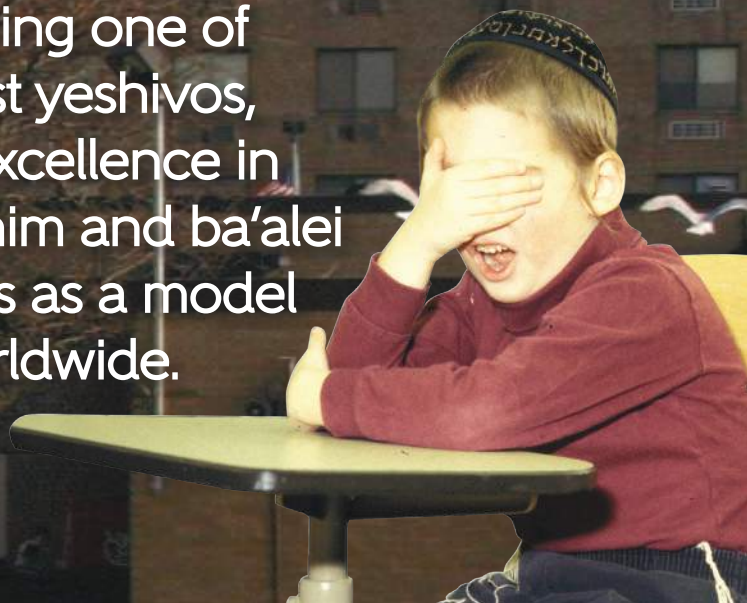


resolved to establish a yeshiva where his children could learn. With the help of other community members, Yeshiva Darchei Torah rented space in a shul and opened its doors for a Pre-1A and first grade class in 1972.

Five years later, when the Yeshiva needed a rebbi for seventh grade, Rabbi Yaakov Bender was hired. A Mirrer Yeshiva avreich with a reputation as an outstanding Tzeirei leader, Hatzolah askan and ba'al chesed, he did not yet have formal classroom experience. But Rav Bender's exceptional talent soon revealed itself, and by the end of the academic year, R' Yisroel Bloom, R' Mendel Goldberg and Mr. Lloyd Keilson asked him to become the menahel. Rav Bender accepted, and laid out his philosophy of chinuch: He believed that excellent learning and excellent middos must always go hand in hand, and that a yeshiva has an obligation to educate every single talmid, whatever his strengths or challenges.

Since then, the combination of high achievement in Torah and sensitivity to others' needs has been the trademark of the Darchei talmid. From the earliest grades—where the Middos Mission program teaches the youngest boys—to the most senior avreichim, the Darchei hashkafah

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continues to be all about inclusion and being adam lachaveiro, within a context of Torah learning on the highest level and academic excellence.

Make Room for More

As the fledgling Yeshiva Darchei Torah began to grow, it rented a series of spaces in shuls and other buildings. By 1981, it had found accommodations in a wing of a building on the campus of the Hartman YMHA, located on a huge property nearly the size of a city block.

When the Hartman Y announced in 1991 that it was ready to close operations and sell off the entire property, it was clear that Darchei had been presented with a golden opportunity. Mr. Lloyd Keilson spearheaded the campaign to raise money for the purchase, miraculously managing to meet the six-month funding deadline. When a press release about the Yeshiva was published in The Jewish Press, it was spotted by Mr. Yaakov Melohn, a Manhattan-based businessman. After seeking the advice of his rebbi, Rav Yisroel Belsky zt"l, Yaakov and his wife came forward to offer to help purchase the campus in memory of Yaakov's father Yosef z"l. The Yeshiva was now in possession of an eight-and-a-half acre campus!





The Darchei hashkafah continues to be all about inclusion and bein adam lachaveiro, within a context of Torah learning on the highest level and academic excellence.

For the first 23 years of its existence, Darchei was an elementary school, sending its graduates to mesivtos throughout the country. All that changed when Rav Bender welcomed Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Lowinger's autistic son, Chaim Shlomo, into the fifth grade. The Lowingers had tried many schools and options for their son, and were thrilled when he seemed to finally find his place at Darchei. They even subsequently moved their family to the neighboring village of Lawrence. But where could they send their son when he finished eighth grade?

With Mr. Lowinger's encouragement and support, Rav Bender opened Mesivta Chaim Shlomo - the Maurice and Edith Lowinger Mesivta High School - in 1995, and it was comprised of two classrooms adjoining the Yeshiva's gymnasium. One year later, Chaim Shlomo Lowinger was welcomed as a talmid of its second ninth grade. Shortly afterward, the Mesivta moved into its own, newly constructed building.

Mesivta Chaim Shlomo began with two parallel classes but grew in leaps and bounds after that. Success breeds success, and a few years later, as the





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pioneer *bachurim* approached graduation, Rav Bender decided to offer them the opportunity to continue at Darchei for yeshiva gedolah. In 1999 Beis Medrash Heichal Dovid began its first zeman. Several months later, Rav Bender appointed Rav Shlomo Avigdor Altusky, a highly regarded rosh yeshiva in Montreal, to lead it. While the Beis Medrash began comprised primarily of Darchei talmidim, it now attracts young men from all over the United States. Together, the Mesivta and Beis Medrash have molded well over a thousand bachurim into true Bnei Torah and bnei Aliyah, and the Yeshiva has earned its rightful place on the 'eastern wall' of American yeshivos.

By the late 1990s, as Darchei's enrollment approached 1,000 talmidim, the elementary school began to overflow its original one-story brick building and was obliged to use auxiliary trailers for the spillover. The situation was clearly unsustainable. In 2008 the Yeshiva broke ground on a massive, 186,000-square foot complex that would provide classroom space for five parallel classes per grade, in addition to a beis medrash/assembly hall, a dining hall, science and computer laboratories, an indoor gym for the preschool, administrative offices and a spacious home for the Rabenstein Learning Center. With the help of an IDA bond issue and a vigorous fundraising campaign, the Yeshiva celebrated the chanukas habayis of the new complex in the spring of 2011.





In response, Rabbi Bender conceived the idea to create a “mini-Lakewood” within the Darchei campus.

As Darchei talmidim grew up and graduated, they would go off to study in the top yeshivos of Yerushalayim, often continuing to Beth Medrash Govoha in Lakewood afterward. Some, however, expressed their desire to continue their learning in Far Rockaway upon their return from Eretz Yisrael. In

response, Rav Bender conceived the idea to create a “mini-Lakewood” within the Darchei campus. A *kibbutz* was launched in 2005 with six bachurim. Today, Kollel Tirtza Devorah, named for Mr. Lowinger’s grandmother, comprises chaburos on several different sugyos, and includes more than 30 full-time members and 30 part-timers (primarily mechanchim who join for the afternoon seder). The yungeleit have settled within the local neighborhood, raising families and helping to transform the community into a bastion of Torah life.

Building the Community

Rav Bender’s breadth of vision encompasses not only the well-being of the Yeshiva and its talmidim, but the greater community as well. When the Darchei campus was purchased in 1991, the neighborhood was considered highly undesirable. While that made the purchase price relatively affordable, only three Orthodox families owned houses in the area.



These projects have revitalized the neighborhood and have created a domino effect, encouraging scores of Yeshiva-affiliated families to purchase their own homes and move into the area.

But Rav Bender hoped to attract more frum families to the area, and began by building 12 houses for yeshiva families in 1999. Five years later, eight more houses were constructed, and 16 more followed in 2010. The Yeshiva also bought a small apartment building in 2007 to be used for kollel housing. These projects have revitalized the neighborhood and have created a domino effect, encouraging scores of Yeshiva-affiliated families to purchase their own homes and move into the area. Today, the neighborhood has been completely transformed, with an estimated 200 frum families living near the Yeshiva.

The Yeshiva is a hub of activity throughout the year. In the summertime, the campus is the site of Simcha Day Camp, a program that serves hundreds of children from the local community and beyond. Machaneh HaKayitz, another community day camp, opened in 2009. (A few years ago, the Yeshiva acquired a property in upstate Sullivan County for Camp Oraysa, an overnight program for its Mesivta and Beis Medrash students.)





No Talmid Left Behind

Rav Bender has always emphasized that chinuch must include every single talmid, and yeshivos must work with each child so that no one falls through the cracks. Stronger students should be encouraged to help weaker students; a talmid who takes responsibility for pushing a friend in a wheelchair or tutoring a weaker student is not only doing chesed – he is enhancing his own growth as a complete ben Torah.

Rav Bender began putting his ideals into practice in 1981, when he introduced an innovation that was, at the time, considered revolutionary. He created a resource room within the Yeshiva, to provide extra help to about 30 boys who had mild learning issues. The goal was to help these boys succeed within the framework of the Yeshiva, without charging parents an extra penny. That resource program evolved into what is today the Rabenstein Learning Center, and Rav Bender considers it one of Darchei's finest achievements.

The Yeshiva continued to pursue a policy of inclusion and educating each talmid *al pi darko*, with the right niche for each boy within the Yeshiva setting. The Weiss Vocational Center was opened in 1995 to offer less academically inclined Mesivta bachurim the opportunity to develop







The Yeshiva has grown in size, but the staff continues to maintain the same warmth and individual attention to talmidim it offered when there were only two classes.

marketable skills in areas like plumbing, electricity and woodworking. Some of its graduates are now respected tradesmen in the Far Rockaway/ Five Towns community, while others have pursued different careers, including business, long-term learning or teaching. The Yeshiva's many academically gifted talmidim are also given special opportunities to develop their talents, with the Yeshiva providing them extra enrichment via advanced shiurim, and in general studies, Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

About seven years ago, Rav Bender inaugurated a program to help talmidim whose learning may be challenged not by physical or cognitive issues but by difficult family situations. Students from widowed or divorced homes, or who have other family challenges, are provided with whatever help they might need to succeed in yeshiva. Assistance ranges from new clothing for yom tov to counseling services to pairing them with local fathers who accompany the boys to shul on Shabbos.



The Yeshiva has grown in size, but the staff continues to maintain the same warmth and individual attention to talmidim it offered when there were only two classes. Rav Bender has expanded the staff and delegated responsibilities, but himself remains astonishingly on top of everything that transpires.

Today, Rav Bender is considered an international authority on chinuch, and Yeshiva Darchei Torah is a beacon for yeshivos throughout the world. The members of its Hanhala make themselves available to all mechanchim who come to consult with them and learn from their success.

Darchei alumni are found all over the world, thriving as marbitzei Torah, long-term learners, professionals and businessmen. Some graduates have started their own yeshivos, and Darchei derives special nachas from those who have returned to the Yeshiva to serve as rebbeim. Regardless of the path a Darchei talmid takes in life, the chinuch he received there remains with him forever. Rav Bender and his staff make sure each one leaves the Yeshiva imprinted with a lifelong commitment to Torah, avodah, and a genuine concern for the needs of others. 🕊️



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