

From Yavneh to Lublin

By Reb Sruly Bornstein and Dovi Safier



IN THE INTRODUCTION

to his magnum opus *Ohr Hameir*, Rav Meir outlined his vision for building Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. He begins by citing a Yerushalmi in *Demai* regarding the purification process of the Parah Adumah, in which Rav Yehoshua ben Kavsai cites the transformative understanding he learned from the “Otzar [vault] of Yavneh”: one pure individual has the limitless capability to sprinkle the purifying waters on an infinite number of impure individuals.

Rav Meir Shapiro understands this “Otzar of Yavneh” to refer to the famous yeshivah that was spared from the destruction of the Churban by the Roman general Vespasian, thanks to the personal appeal of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. Because of the protection of “*Yavneh v’chachamehah*” that he extracted from the Romans, the yeshivah blossomed into the post-Churban era’s epicenter of Torah learning.

From the story of Yavneh, Rav Meir learned that the ratio of *ohr* to *choshech* does not have to be quid pro quo. The small bit of light that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai preserved ultimately overpowered immense darkness. This was Rav Meir’s hope for Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin — that it would serve as the Yavneh of his generation, which was marred by so much spiritual darkness.

Rav Meir laid out this vision in an editorial in the *Yiddishe Togblatt*, claiming that the names of their yeshivos shared a similarity, too: Yavneh V’Chachmehah and Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. He even used Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai’s legendary wording as he pleaded, “*Tein li Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, v’chachamehah.*”

Rav Meir’s perception of his yeshivah as a lighthouse for an entire generation is likely why he felt so strongly that America’s Jews should share in the burden of sustaining this vision. In his heart, he believed that he was doing them a tremendous service by garnering their support.

A report in *Der Amerikaner* cites a *derashah* delivered by Rav Meir at Boston’s Beis Hamedrash Hagodol on Shabbos Mevarchim Adar Alef of 1927, before Mussaf. Playing on the timeless words just recited by the congregation, he noted that Poland offered “*chayim shel ahavas Torah v’yiras Shamayim*,” whereas America provided “*chayim shel osher v’kavod.*” Rav Meir hoped to address this imbalance by enabling America to utilize its financial resources to support its spiritual institutions.

IN SOME WAYS, Rav Meir Shapiro’s efforts are somewhat incongruous: in creating the Daf Yomi program, he was looking out for the layman. But he was simultaneously building an elite yeshivah, designed for the most brilliant and talented young men in Europe.

The common thread running through both of these very different endeavors stretches back to Rav Meir’s understanding of Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai’s mission. He did not intend for Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin to be a secluded haven whose influence would be limited to the best and brightest. Rav Meir envisioned the yeshivah as a blazing beacon of light amid the spiritual darkness encroaching on Poland, Eastern Europe, and even the greater Jewish world.

It is no coincidence that Daf Yomi and Chachmei Lublin were introduced simultaneously. Rav Meir understood that in order for the Daf Yomi movement to be successful, you almost *needed* a Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin. You needed that lighthouse of Torah and *chassidus* to shine forth from the heart of Poland so that the *pashute Yid* would have the capacity to sit down, open up a Gemara, and learn the *daf* at the end of a long, draining workday.

Rav Yehuda Meir Abramowicz (1914–2007), a student at Chachmei Lublin (who would go on to become the chairman of World Agudah and an influential representative of the party in the Knesset), recalled that one night Rav Meir gathered a group of his elite students and instructed them to head out into the local shuls and initiate Daf Yomi *shiurim*. Rav Yehuda Meir was assigned the ancient *kloiz* of the Chozeh of Lublin. “I admit that when I entered the shul for the first time, I was alarmed and frightened,” he said. “The study hall was empty and abandoned. Behind the

stove crowded a few indigent peddlers, merchants, and tired wagon-drivers who came to the study hall to warm up a bit. And that was it.”

But as a faithful *talmid*, he obeyed his rebbi’s command. “Slowly, slowly, these simple and downcast Jews were drawn into the *shiur*.... Each night, fifty to sixty men would gather, and they were surprisingly diligent in their learning... the desolate and abandoned study hall was once more filled with the life of Torah. So it was in all the study halls in Lublin, and many other Jewish communities in Poland.”

In the essence of Rav Meir Shapiro’s lifework lies a profound understanding of the timeless interplay between *ohr* (light) and *choshech* (darkness). Drawing inspiration from Yavneh’s storied past, Rav Meir saw beyond the superficial dichotomies of his age, recognizing the indispensable role both Torah scholars and the layman played in the sustenance and proliferation of Torah.

Only a visionary of his caliber could even dream of bridging these gaps through the twin pillars of Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin and the Daf Yomi movement. Through Daf Yomi *shiurim* and his very own “Yavneh,” Rav Meir was responsible for not just restoring the Torah crown to its past glory in Lublin, but also for rekindling the spirit of Torah learning among the masses, cementing his legacy as a visionary leader who recognized and harnessed the boundless potential of every Jew, transcending both time and place in accomplishing the impossible.