

The Passing of Mir – Part 1

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Mir Yeshivah today is probably the largest and most famous yeshivah in the world, with some 6,000 students scattered over numerous campuses and buildings. Its head, Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel, died recently, and tens of thousands turned out for his funeral. Yet most of the Jewish world, and certainly the non-Jewish world, have no idea who he or Mir is. Mir is my alma mater and the single most important influence on my religious life so I have a personal view on its progress. It has gone through three very different phases and I should like to contrast them. We can learn from history.

My late father travelled from London to Lithuania in 1934 to study in the famous Mir yeshivah. His experience there was absolutely transformative. It was not just the brilliant study, the phenomenal minds of the “academic” roshei yeshivah, or the powerful moral influence of the “dean of students”, the mashgiach Reb Yerucham. It was also the ethos of the yeshivah, the way the students lived what they studied, the emphasis on ethics, behavior, comradeship, even appearance. It was said that you needed a tin of boot polish if you wanted to study in Mir. The great yeshivot regarded themselves as purely centers of study for its own sake, not as a preparing ground for the rabbinate; nevertheless a whole generation of major rabbis emerged from my father’s generation.

The Second World War destroyed Mir, but it also destroyed the nature and character of Lithuanian Jewry. The main body of the yeshivah, including the legendary Reb Leizer Yehuda and his family, fled eastwards and ended up surviving the war in Shanghai, where Mir relocated temporarily. From Shanghai some went to the USA. But Reb Leizer Yehuda and his circle moved to Jerusalem where they reestablished Mir, in name at least.

That family was an amazing collection of brains and spirit. Rav Leizer Yehuda, gentle and wise, was the moving spirit, the personification of the ideals of Lithuanian Jewry; intellect, religious devotion and humanity. He had three sons, Reb Chaim Zev, Reb Beinush, and Reb Moshe (all the rabbonim were called “Reb”, surprisingly, because technically it is a lesser title than Rav but none of them had lowered themselves to seek a rabbinical title, which they thought beneath their dignity and fit only for lesser mortals. Reb Chaim Zev, known as Chazap, was the mashgiach, the spiritual guide. He was a warm, outstanding man who continued the tradition of his father. Reb Beinush was tall, handsome, and imposing; he was reputedly a brilliant chess player. And Reb Moishe was the modestly endowed secretary and administrator. Rav Leizer Yehuda’s daughter was married to the brilliant, singleminded giant of Torah, Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz, who in turn had an even more brilliant son-in-law, Reb Nochum Partzovitz (known in the old Mir as Trokker, from his home town).

They were the personalities I encountered in 1965 when I went to study in Mir. Despite my hybrid education and independent mind, they welcomed me into

the yeshivah and their homes. This was largely because the affection they all held for my late father. I could see and feel, despite their differences, the magic of Lithuanian Jewry.

But Mir Yeshivah itself was a different matter. Its building was not well maintained, dirty, and odorous. It was located in Bet Israel, just off Mea Shearim, and served as a general dosshouse and refuge for the poor and lost. It was when I arrived, essentially a kollel, a yeshivah for older and married men, some 150 of whom often came for part of the day only to earn their stipendium and then went somewhere else to get another one. Only a select few scholars sat up front, opposite Reb Chaim and Reb Nochum, and studied with them every day. The big hall, the Beis Hamedrash, was full of men and smoke during the daytime, but all but empty at night and over weekends. There were a few dormitories occupied by old bachelors (a tradition from Lithuania, where often great minds needed more years immersed in study before they were prepared to take on the obligations of married life).

Most of the men in the Beis Hamedrash then were Yerushalmi, descendants of eighteenth and nineteenth century refugees from Eastern Europe, a premodern pious world, far from Lithuania. They were there because that was where they found refuge, but not necessarily because they merited it, and because Mir needed numbers in those days for the meager subsidies it was granted. And finally at the bottom of the food chain there were, in 1965, a handful of single men from abroad, like me. This Mir changed after the Six Day war when the flood gates opened and many more came, mainly from the USA, to swell the ranks.

My first year was probably the single most influential year of my life. Rav Leizer Yehuda died and I was adopted by Chazap. Then, not many months after, he fell ill and died too. Reb Chaim became the undisputed Rosh Yeshivah and he took over Chazap's role as the Spiritual Guide, as well; but he was far too brilliant and academic to be a good mashgiach. His lectures packed out the hall, but if his mind was into the intricacies of midrash, his soul was not pastorally inclined. Nominally, Reb Aaron Chodosh assumed the role of pastoral supervisor; he was sweet and good, but a totally ineffective man. It was the brilliant Reb Nochum, the archetypal Litvak, who became my mentor and the person I consulted and interacted with most. He knew I was an unusual student, different than the others, and he humored me and treated me as such.

No one who has not experienced it can imagine the drug-like addiction to studying Torah that a place like Mir induced. Nowhere have I ever found a similar intensity in prayer. It was overpowering and inspirational. I lost myself in its atmosphere and I will always be beholden to those who were part of it. During my years at Mir I increasingly ploughed a lone furrow, because I was consciously training to be a rabbi. That was rather like deciding that although you were in an institute for Ph.D. research your ambition was to teach high school. Still, Mir tolerated me, and indeed encouraged me. When I was ready, Reb Nochum, and indeed Reb Beinush (with whom I took a brief break to South Africa in 1966 to help raise money for the yeshivah), ensured that Reb Chaim Shmuelevitz wrote me an impressive semicha (ordination).

But, as I was doing my own thing, I could see the yeshivah around me was

changing and its transformation from an institution of less than 200 to a corporation of 6,000 I will explore next week.