

A Rosh Yeshiva

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Fifty years ago I had the privilege of studying in a great yeshiva in Israel. In those days there were none of the more modern yeshivot that welcomed students from different backgrounds and levels of knowledge and religious commitment. There were only a few "hardcore" yeshivot that modeled themselves on, and were hardly different than, the great academies of Lithuania.

You could gain acceptance if you were either a really first-class student who was immersed in Talmud or, as with most things in Israel then and now, you had "protektzia" (influential contacts). And I did. My father had studied in Mir in Lithuania and was friendly there with several outstanding rabbis who, after the Second World War had reestablished themselves and founded new institutions in Israel.

I was incredibly fortunate to be sent (initially reluctantly) to study as a teenager in one such yeshiva and then several years later, after university, at another. The latter, was very reluctant to take me, given that I had been to university and studied philosophy. But because of their respect for my late father, and with a promise that I would not discuss philosophy with anyone there, I was allowed in.

Although I say it myself, I devoted myself assiduously to studying hard for long hours to make up for the years I had "wasted" on secular education. I was first into the Hall of Study in the morning and the last out at night. I stopped reading any other material or listening to the radio. I conformed enthusiastically. For I knew that this was the only way to benefit from the experience. So that's what I did, and it was the highlight of my student years, easily surpassing Cambridge for the intensity and intellectual challenge it offered.

There were several heads of the yeshiva, and the older generation all treated me with varying degrees of kindness and encouragement. I respected them enormously and deferred to their authority. Of course I was out of my depth. I was nowhere near the levels expected of students who devoted their lives entirely to studying Torah. But I made up for that with my attitude and devotion to study, and several of the more junior Roshei Yeshiva and Mashgichim (academic and pastoral leaders) took me under their wings.

But there were several younger sons of the main Rosh Yeshiva who resented me and tried their best to undermine my position. No doubt because, in their zealotry, they believed I should not have been there. They literally "spied" on me and reported to their father anything I said that they did not approve of. Fortunately I did not step out of line. I survived to live out my allotted years there, to be acquire the certification I needed to practice as a rabbi, and I left to begin my career.

Perhaps they had been right in their antagonism towards me. After I left I no

longer accepted all the ideas and opinions that have come to characterize the Charedi world that they belonged to. Actually, neither did most of the earlier generation either. In that sense I could be said to be a failure. But even so, I maintained very warm relations with my alma mater and several "junior" heads of the academy. Some of these Rosh Yeshivas would visit me during their trips abroad. Every few years I would return to spend the summer months studying there to refresh myself, and I was treated kindly by the old guard, and then but ignored by the sons of those who had always resented me.

It is now fifty years later. Recently saw an article in the Jewish Press about one of my two nemeses who had just died prematurely after an unfortunate illness. His gray beard surrounded a patriarchal face, with twinkling eyes and an angelic smile under the regulation black homburg hat. He was lauded as a brilliant, humane, and good Rosh Yeshiva whose loss would be mourned by thousands.

I looked at his picture, and I read the eulogy, and I wondered, "Could this be the same unkind zealot that had spied on me, had expressed his dislike of me, and had tried to prevent me from being in the yeshiva?" And it was not just me. There were others too. Had we been people who wanted in anyway to undermine or diminish the institution I would have understood. But this was not the case. Did he maintain such attitudes for the rest of his life? Was he, beneath the avuncular facade, still an unforgiving hardliner? Or had he changed, and had age softened him? Was it up to me to give his memory the benefit of the doubt and revise my opinion, and posthumously forgive him his unkindness?

So much has happened since, for better and for worse. I have changed. The world has changed. I am happy to say, without, I hope, arrogance or false pride, that I do not bear grudges, and I always prefer to see the good and focus on being positive. So I am glad I have been reminded of one of the few negative memories of my time in yeshiva, and I will assume that he did soften and was a great Rosh Yeshiva who left behind him a loving grateful family and a legacy of Torah at its best. I am glad our paths crossed and sorry I was not able to win him over then. But I can hope that if we had met recently perhaps I might have.

Yet somehow I doubt it. The two camps, of accommodation and tolerance on one side and hard-lined zealotry on the other, remain within our religion as in every other one. Strange creatures we humans are.