

The Vaad- An Anchor in a Turbulent Sea

by Rabbi Zev Cohen

The Challenge

The majority of observant Jews of today's generation have attended yeshiva for at least some part of their lives. The atmosphere of the yeshiva environment facilitates spiritual growth in unparalleled ways and has successfully produced a generation of Torah teachers, authorities and leaders. But this growth takes place within the Yeshiva walls but not too much once he has left those walls. One of the most serious challenges which face us today involves the Yeshiva student's adjustment to the secular society after he leaves full-time learning in Yeshiva or Kollel.

Life in a mixed Jewish-secular neighborhood, attendance at a secular school, work in a secular environment—all these can be daunting for someone who wants to maintain the spiritual level he acquired while in Yeshiva. Leaving the protective environment of the Yeshiva is not only a logistic relocation, but a spiritual relocation as well. Not only are hours of learning diminished, the intensity of whatever hours are available is diminished as well. More pointed, the milieu in which the erstwhile Yeshiva student mixes is usually antithetical

Rabbi Cohen, a *talmid* of the Lakewood Yeshiva, is the Rav of Congregation Adas Yeshurun in Chicago and Co-chairman of the Midwest Conference of Synagogue Rabbanim. He was one of the founding members of the Chicago Community Kollel, served for many years as a Rebbe and Mashgiach in the Skokie Yeshiva and is now also Rosh Kollel of the Choshen Mishpat Kollel in Chicago. He has recorded over 150 tapes for the Dial-A-Daf series, and has published numerous articles in both local and national journals.

to the way of life to which he was accustomed in Yeshiva. The transition is especially precarious because the student is often alone, without any support from his environment to help him counter these challenges.

The Beginnings

A number of years ago, while serving as the Mashgiach at Beis Midrash LeTorah (commonly known as the Skokie Yeshiva), I was approached by a group of students who were seeking to strengthen their spirituality. In the parlance of Yeshivos, they were “looking for *chizuk*.” While trying to decide how to assist them, I recalled a description of the the *vaadim* (Musar groups, sing. *vaad*) of the Yeshiva in Kelm, Poland, that I had once heard from the Mashgiach of Beis Midrash Govoha in Lakewood, Harav Nosson Wachtfogel, *zt”l*. A Musar *vaad* was designed to enhance matters of Musar. Musar refers to those matters in Torah pertaining to one’s relationship to Hashem (such as fear and love of Him, trust in Him and contemplating Him), as well as those matters pertaining to character building. A *vaad* consisted of a group of students who would meet weekly where they would accept upon themselves various undertakings (*kabbalos*, sing., *kabbala*) for spiritual growth. Subsequently, at their weekly meetings each would report on his progress in carrying out these undertakings.

Inspired by this example, I decided to begin a *vaad* with these *bochurim* modeled on the Kelm format. Our first *kabbala* was to agree to recite the blessing *asher yatzar* following bathroom visits from a Siddur, since reciting it by heart usually leads to lack of proper concentration (*kavana*) on its meaning. After a few weeks, we added a further undertaking: to recite the blessing after eating food, *al hamichya*, with *kavana*. Much later we undertook to do the same with respect to all *berachos* recited before and after partaking of food, and even printed cards setting forth these *berachos* for easy reference.

These steps took almost a year to implement, and had a profound impact on each of us in our personal spiritual development. They were effective particularly in three specific areas. First, we strengthened the *kavana* of our *berachos*. Second, the act of reciting *berachos* from a printed page served as a constant reminder to pay attention to our spiritual growth and avoid pitfalls during the rest of the day. Finally, and possibly most importantly, it created a bond among

the members of the *vaad* which, in turn, further enhanced our commitment to our undertakings. We had created a unique group based on totally spiritual interests, and belonging to this “private club” of sorts gave each of us the boost we so desperately needed to rise above ourselves in all areas of our lives.

The Vaad in the Workplace

Members of the *vaad* gradually married and left the Skokie Yeshiva. Many of them settled in the West Rogers Park neighborhood of Chicago where I served then, and still serve, as Rav. Some of the former *vaad* members, who by now had entered the workforce, approached me anew, once again “looking for *chizuk*.”

Originally, the aim of the *vaad* had been to promote enhanced growth for students still in a Yeshiva environment. But this time the stakes were higher; the workplace atmosphere was fraught with spiritual dangers. The *vaad* took on an entirely new purpose: to prevent a significant deterioration of their spiritual state. In addition, there were now wives and children to be taken into consideration; their spirituality had also become part of the equation.

And so, our *vaad* reconvened. The *vaad* members could not change their environment, but at least they could try to prevent their environment from changing them.

We met once a week, and, as we had done while in Yeshiva, undertook *kabbalos*. We also added the element of beginning each meeting with 20-30 minutes of Musar thoughts and then went around the table to hear each member report on the progress of our *kabbalos*.

Once again, we undertook to recite *berachos* from a Siddur. The concept was, as above, that by reciting the *berachos* we would be reminded that we were different and had to behave differently. As a result, that famous (or infamous) office social center, the water cooler, became transformed into a *berachos* center.

From *berachos* we moved on to *kabbalos* meant to strengthen how each of us davened Mincha in the office. Most members did not have set times for davening, so we created reminders to daven at the proper times, together with suggested locations to insure that we davened with the proper respect.

While these small injections of spirituality into a decidedly non-spiritual world enabled each of us to keep the environment from overcoming us, the

members soon felt the need for more *chizuk* than our enhanced *berachos* and davening could provide. We responded by undertaking to spend an additional five to ten minutes learning Torah each day during work breaks.

The Next Steps

After one to two years of holding our *vaad* meetings, we set out on a new direction, one which was to bring about great internal change. Society's notions of modesty had descended propitiously, with standards of dress and talk worsening with each passing year, and the social mores that create a barrier between the genders no longer in existence. In response, we undertook a new *kabbala* called "*histaklus*"—meaning, that if we noticed something that was inappropriate for us to look at, we would turn our heads away to avoid gazing or staring at the sight.

With much *siyata dishmaya* we discovered a an important teaching in the work *Tuvcha Yabiy'u*¹ that would transform our efforts. According to this *sefer*, when a person is tempted and instead looks away, he creates an *eyn ratzon*, or a propitious time for davening and beseeching Hashem for personal needs. This became a strong encouragement for us to look away.

Paradoxically, by facing up to a challenge which had become ubiquitous, we found a way within that challenge to connect ourselves to spirituality even without resorting to *berachos*, *tefillos* or any Musar work. Every member of the *vaad*, especially during his review of the *kabbalos*, centered now on how he managed his *histaklus*. This connected us to Hashem at the very moment when we were being challenged and became a dynamic catalyst for our growth.

We then decided to extend this struggle against our environment beyond work hours to the commute to and from work. When confronted with immodest billboards or sights on the train, we pushed ourselves to look away and to instead connect to Hashem with our prayers. Imbued with the spirit of the *vaad*, our response to, and interaction with, our environment changed radically, and our entire day changed with it. As a result the *vaad* was no longer confined to Thursday evening at 10:00 PM; the *vaad* was with us all week, every day, all day. Our spiritual growth was palpable.

1. By HaRav Yitzchak Zilbershtein of Bnei Brak.

Shortly after this transforming change, the *vaad* added a major new *kabbalah*. We based it on the story of Rabbi Akiva, cited in Berachos 60a, who lost his rooster, donkey and lamp while spending a night in the forest, and was still able to declare that all was for the best. We began to apply this idea to our daily lives, and to respond to every situation with the idea that whatever Hashem does is for the best; that He is in control; that He loves us; that He helps us; and that whatever He does is for our good.

We had become used to naming our *kabbalos* by code words, and we called this one “*kol ma*,” the first two words of the aphorism in the above Talmudic citation that whatever Hashem does is for the good. This undertaking had the effect of building us a staunch connection to Hashem. Thinking about Hashem constantly brought incredible results. The code words “*histaklus*” and “*kol ma*” kept us bound together on our quest to remain strong and connected to the Master of the world.

Other *Kabbalos*

Once, at a wedding, I overheard the Philadelphia Rosh HaYeshiva, Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, telling the groom before his wedding that the most important word in the *kesubah* (marriage document) was *okir*. This word signifies that the groom undertakes to “cherish” his bride, which, Rav Kamenetsky said, was the most crucial element of marriage. I thought that this was an idea that the *vaad* should embrace.

We decided to work on ways to convey to our wives that we cherished them and our marriages by seeking to express our sincere appreciation for everything they did for us. “*Okir*” became the catchword for our new undertaking. Within a short time, this changed our roles as fathers and husbands and helped create an atmosphere of joy and love in our homes.

Before every Yom Tov we usually added a *kabbalah* which would prepare us for it. During the Three Weeks, we sat on the floor for ten seconds a day to help us make the Churban a little more real in our eyes. We stared at the Chanukah candles for ten seconds after they were lit, to purify our eyes. We tried to dance every night the week before Purim to intensify the joy of *mi-shenichnas Adar marbin besimcha*—“when Adar enters one must increase joy.” These undertakings each transformed the special days of the year for us.

Some *kabbalos* were retained for a week; others for a month. Some suggestions were rejected and others were embraced. But the ones that stayed with us throughout the year were “*kol ma*” and “*histaklus*” which built us spiritually, helped us, and, I dare say, saved us. Above all, these undertakings defined us in our own eyes as Jews who live with an inner relationship to Hashem.

After thirteen years as members of the *vaad*, in addition to our other *kabbalos*, we now focus on one: speaking to Hashem and saying, “*Hineni!* I am here, Hashem and I want to do your will.” We seek to do this as many times as feasible, but at least once a day.

The *Vaad's* Impact

Two letters I have received from members of the *vaad* are illustrative of the effect the *vaadim* have had on its members. One member of the *vaad* wrote:

The *vaad* is the single most important activity of my week and currently of my life. I have had the privilege to attend the *vaad* for the last two years. It provides me the opportunity to filter my environment and work events through the lens of Torah. My family understands the importance that I put on the *vaad* and it sends an important lesson to them. A person needs to continue to grow through all stations of life.

Another wrote:

A *derech* was clearly given of how to *shteig* in America in the post-yeshiva era of one's life, and my fellow *vaad* members and I are trying their best to follow this. The combination of the Rav's encouraging *divrei Torah*, along with his sharing all of our personal struggles, has given me tremendous *chizuk*. I look forward to the *vaad* every week. It is a sanctuary from the filth of the workplace that I am subjected to. The *vaad*, more than *chavrusos*, *rabbeim* or good friends, has been the biggest factor in my post-yeshiva growth.

A Rabbi's Duty

Twenty-five years ago, when I began my rabbinic career, there were very few Lakewood *talmidim* who served in the rabbinate. After I undertook my position, a certain experienced individual advised me that the main job of a Rav was to keep his Shul members from falling in their spiritual level; implying that spiritual growth for working people was an impractical pipe-dream. This was disheartening at the time, but my experience has shown me that this is unequivocally false.

Yeshivos do a wonderful job in producing truly committed Jews. But even after they leave Yeshiva, they still need to grow—and they *can* grow; they certainly do not deserve to be neglected. Chazal teach us that an angel is defined as an *omed*, one who stands in one place, while Man is defined as a *holech*, one who moves forward. We are only true humans when we move forward; otherwise we fail in our humanity. It is the Rabbi's duty to see to it that this happens.

Recently, a Jewish leader addressed the Choshen Mishpat Kollel of Chicago, comprised of Rabbonim and veteran Kollel members, and suggested that every Rav should visit the workplaces of his members in order to understand what tests they undergo day by day. I do not know if it is possible to have every Rav do this. But I do know that every Rav has the ability not only help every Jew maintain his spirituality in the workplace, but to help him soar to greater spiritual heights.

It is said that the true intention of the great Rav Yisroel Salanter, founder of the Musar movement 150 years ago in Europe, was to spread Musar among the working people, more so than among its Yeshiva educated population.²

My experience shows me that we can succeed in this. Our *vaad* currently has a branch in Jerusalem and a branch in Far Rockaway, NY. It is our fervent hope and dream that one day, there will be such a *vaad* in every Shul throughout the world.

2. Rav Matisyahu Salomon, citing Rav Itzel Peterburger in *Shaarey Ohr*.