

Tuvia Vinitzky
 tuvია@vmgr.com

The Noviminsker Rebbe, *shlita*, has said that we live in a time of rampant cynicism. But every once in a while an event occurs which breaks through even the most hardened layer of cynicism and virtually explodes with hope and triumph. It is not trite nor poetic license to say that the Yovel Dinner of the Telshe Yeshiva of Chicago was such an event.

It was clear when I arrived that this dinner was intended to be a major event. Free parking, electronic signs with sign-in directions, backlit displays, and the main ballroom at the Hyatt – the biggest ballroom in downtown Chicago. We filled the ballroom. Various numbers were floated, but the consensus of the rumor mill was an attendance of over 1300. A five-man singing group and band imported from NY were singing impressive harmonies as the guests moved from the reception area into the main ballroom for dinner. Dinner started exactly on time, which was fine since – this is Telz – the guests all arrived on time.

The dinner was honoring the Roshei HaYeshiva. Three yungeleit came to Chicago fifty years ago and built a yeshiva against all odds. While HaRav Chaim Schmelczer, *ztz'l*, is no longer with us, HaRav Chaim Dov Keller and HaRav Avrohom Chaim Levin were seated on the dais.

I am not sure that Telzers in general are known for their spontaneity or their emotional outbursts. But as the last guests were being seated and the band started playing, a dancing line started to appear from nowhere. Within minutes virtually all the men in attendance were dancing in one big circle around the outer edge of the ballroom. I saw several groups of friends re-uniting after many years, and more than one of these reunions resulted in the participants literally breaking into little dances between the tables. In the time I was in the yeshiva or the years since, I have never seen anything like it at any yeshiva simcha.

Alumni had flown to Chicago from around the world, and Chicago cooperated in its finest tradition -- by providing a massive snow storm. O'Hare airport was chaos, flights were cancelled, and many attendees never made it - but it hardly seemed to matter. Inside the ballroom it was fine weather, as the alumni were transported back in time to their days in the Beis Medrash.

An audio-visual presentation paid tribute to the HaRav Schmelczer *ztz'l*. It is easy to sling epitaphs like "he treated me like a son," but, the truth is, he did just that. Others have told and will tell grand stories of his deeds, and they are stories that should be told. I cannot help but mention the incredible caring of HaRav Schmelczer. When I think of him, two anecdotes immediately come to my mind that will probably never make it into the official biography.

I had switched from another yeshiva and was starting at Telz. My interview had been to speak in learning with HaRav Levin, who called later and told me the *hanhala* would accept me. The first morning in the yeshiva, after davening, I went to give *shalom* to the *Roshei HaYeshiva*. When I reached Rabbi Schmelczer, I said "sholom aleichem" and started to tell him who I was. I did not have a syllable of my name out when he leaned over and said "I know who you are. Welcome to the yeshiva, we are looking forward to you being with us."

A small thing? Perhaps it sounds that way. But to a very nervous young man, he saw a way to make a new *talmid* feel welcome and relieved and excited all at the same time. I would see that same *midah* several years later when my daughter *a"h* was critically ill in the hospital. He came to be *mevaker cholim*, and after everyone else left he said quietly to me "Your wife said you have not been in to work in a month. Are you OK financially?" I answered in my most sincere voice that we were fine, but I appreciated his concern. My answer was not true, but I was not going to bother somebody who had an entire yeshiva to worry about with my minor problems. I should have known better. The next day he came by for a visit and gave me an envelope. He said I could pay it back whenever I was able. Then he quickly ducked out, leaving me with an envelope containing a check equal to what I was short. I have never figured out how he knew exactly what I needed.

The audio-visual presentation and tribute to Rabbi Schmelczer was moving, but at the same time somewhat reassuring. The reassuring part was that just past the audio screen was the *dais* – where his sons were seated. In their positions in the yeshiva and in their lives since the Rav left us, if I may be so bold as to say, they have made their father proud.

Back to the dinner. After the dancing died down, the MC welcomed everyone and announced that the first welcoming speech would be by HaRav Chaim Dov Keller. The Rosh HaYeshiva stood and approached the podium. HaRav Keller is well known for many outstanding accomplishments. But few people outside the yeshiva understand how much the hanhala and rebbeim care for and about their talmidim. When I first arrived at the yeshiva, I asked HaRav Keller several questions in *haskafa*, which led to him offering to learn *Nefesh HaChaim* with me *b'chavrusa* every morning after davening. The Jewish world is ringing his phone off the hook with demands for *klal yisroel* and please come here and please write this and please help here and oh yes the yeshiva needs this and that on top of your regular *shiurim* and *sedarim* every day in the *beis medrash* – but wait, a new guy in the yeshiva is interested in this, I think my time could be spent learning extra with him. I still have a hard time believing it. After a while I had commitments that resulted in my not being able to continue the *chavrusa*. What a fool I was! I should have moved mountains to make sure I could be there. I'll regret losing that *chavrusa* time the rest of my life.

As HaRav Keller approached the podium, the entire assemblage rose to their feet and began singing. *Bochurim*, *yungeliet*, and *balebatim* crowded in front of the dais dancing. The band joined in, and all 1300 people were together being *makabel panim* of the Rosh Yeshiva. It was *kovid-dik*, *laibe-dik*, *ahava-dik*, and a sight that cannot be adequately described. But it had one more attribute – it did not stop.

Telz dinners have a strict time schedule, so the master of ceremonies asked everyone to please be seated. Simple problem to solve – somebody turned off his microphone.

In Talmudic times the performers at the *simchas beis hashoeva* were the *rabbanan*, while the people were spectators. Nowadays we tend to have “inverse *simcha* explosions”, where groups of youngsters rush headlong off into the heights of *simcha* frenzy while the *rabbanan* are spectators. But true *simcha* emanates from the *rabbanan* outward, not the opposite, and that is what happened here. The *rabbanan* on the dais joined hands and sang and danced along. One or two *rebbe*s even hopped onto the head table. It is difficult to describe how unusual and how utterly *emes-dik* it was; I can only presume to say that this was what I imagine the Torah had in mind as *simcha*.

The Rosh HaYeshiva spoke about the yeshiva's early days, and when he finished speaking the dancing and singing resumed. The MC, however, was getting better at convincing the dancing crowd – led by the rabbanan -- to be seated, and soon the dinner chairman came to the podium as the next speaker. The dinner chairman spoke movingly and from the heart, revealing previously unknown anecdotes and personal stories.

My wife has upon occasion pointed out that I myself am one of those people the Noviminsker Rebbe mentioned who tend to be too cynical and not easily impressed. When the chairman spoke, I was very impressed, and not a cynical thought entered my mind. Trust me, I did not improve my character suddenly. Rather the speaker spoke straight from his hearts to our hearts. He told the story of a private meeting not long before HaRav Schmelczer was niftar in which the Rav said “Moshe, someday soon I am going to need you to step up to the plate in a big way for the yeshiva.” The chairman paused and said “rebbe, I think I did what you wanted.”

Some dinner was served, and HaRav Levin was asked to come to the podium and speak. I hardly think I need to describe what happened next. The dancing started all over again.

HaRav Levin does not need me to add to his list of accomplishments. Just a small story to indicate the type of Eved Hashem he is. When he was in aveilus, he changed his seat in the beis medrash. His new seat was, oh, good for the new guy, yes, right next to me. Once I had the courage to glance his way, I saw davening like I have never seen. No flash, all kavanah. How can I explain it? Just one example: for every single chazaras hashatz, the Rosh HaYeshiva followed every word inside the siddur with his finger. Every time, every word. His focus was so instructive, it was like sitting next to a mussar sefer.

HaRav Levin's speech was inspiring. The early days were not easy, and he told of how he learned to take each day one day at a time. Youngsters may stare quizzically, but the old timers know that in 1960 bringing Telshe Yeshiva to the city of Chicago was an idea that most people found preposterous. Including most people in Chicago! We were shown picture of the families driving to Chicago that first day so many decades ago. A ragtag procession of cars and luggage and

children all being driven to the place where Totty envisioned a great yeshiva. The early trials the Roshei HaYeshiva faced each seemed more daunting than the last. Of course, we know how the story ends, and it is indeed a happy ending.

More dancing as HaRav Levin left the podium.

Finally the dancing quieted down for the introduction of the keynote speaker, Rabbi Berel Wean. Rabbi Wein is one of the outstanding orators of recent generations, and his speeches are legendary. He also happened to be the one in Chicago who was asked 50 years ago to gather some baalabatim together to support this new yeshiva. The plan was that Telshe Cleveland was going to send Roshei Yeshiva and 12 students on an eight hour road trip and the glory of Telz would be replanted again in Chicago.

Rabbi Wein told the story of the incident in his youth that, years later, would motivate him to respond to the call from Cleveland. Just before his bar mitzvah, shortly after WW II, his father woke him up one morning and said Rav Herzog from Israel was landing at the airport, and they were going to go and greet him. Young Berel did not know who that was, but he got up and went with his father. I cannot do justice to Rabbi Wein's description of the meeting, nor of the lasting impression made by the shiur klalli Rav Herzog ztz'v gave in Beis Medrash la'Torah. But it was after the shiur klalli that Rav Herzog spoke to the boys and told them as follows: "I have a list in my pocket with the names of 10,000 yiddishe kinder taken during the war and placed into Catholic homes and orphanages. I just met with the Pope and asked him to please give me back our children. He said no."

Rav Herzog put his head on the shtender and wept uncontrollably for close to 10 minutes. The boys were silent and uncomfortable; it was doubtful they had ever even see a grown man cry, and certainly they had never seen a man cry uncontrollably. After a while Rav Herzog lifted his head and told the boys: "I cannot do anything for these children. It is all up to you now. What are you going to do for Klal Yisroel?"

That call echoed in Rabbi Wein's head years later when the phone call came asking him to help start a new yeshiva. All he could hear in his head was Rav Herzog crying "What are you going to do for Klal Yisroel?"

I skipped over one speaker. More accurately, I saved the description of his speech until now to give it the proper context. A noted talmid chacham spoke as a representative of all the talmidim of the past 50 years. His speech was a *kashya* and a *terutz*. He said they never give dinner plaques to roshei yeshiva, only to donors. Why is that he asked? Year after year we invent newer and greater awards and plaques to encourage the generosity of the yeshiva's supporters. But never do we engrave a beautiful plaque for the *hanhalas hayeshiva*. Doesn't it seem a bit backwards, he asked? His answer was as beautiful as it was true - that the talmidim themselves are the true plaques of the roshei yeshiva. A talmid venturing into the world concerned only about *kavod shamayaim* is a gold engraved plaque that says "this talmid courtesy of Telshe Yeshiva."

The caring of the hanhala and rebbeim, the yeshiva's ongoing reach for the glory and malchus of limud hatorah, and the intense desire to bring forth the potential of each and every ben torah, gave me something special when I sat in the beis medrash of Telshe Yeshiva of Chicago. Tonight 1300 guests, plus talmidim everywhere across the globe, had a chance to give a special present to the Roshei HaYeshiva. One great big thank you, served a la cart, with no cynicism or reservations.

Tonight we tore off the top of the usually staid B'nei Telshe Yeshiva, and let pour out the unvarnished truth of what it means to be a talmid of the yeshiva. To the Roshei HaYeshiva and rebbeim we can only say: Rebbe, we may not know what to say or how to thank you, but we will dance and sing, and then we will go back outside to our world and try and show you that we want to be worthy of being your plaques.

And the Noviminsker Rebbe, who often exhorts us to throw away our cynicism? He was supposed to attend the dinner. His flight was cancelled along with many flights from NY due to the blizzard. I cannot speak for him, of course, but I would suggest that perhaps had he been there, he would have seen his dream of a world with no cynicism come true, at least for one night.