



# Just call him “the Mash”

For Rabbi Yisroel Blumenfeld, providing a safe haven in Eretz Yisrael where boys can rediscover Yiddishkeit is an outgrowth of his own experience as the first *talmid* of the legendary *mekarev*, Rabbi Noah Weinberg, back in the '60s. Four decades later, as materialism and technology continue to deaden the spirit, the challenge is greater than ever

BY Eytan Kobre PHOTOS Lior Mizrachi, Yeshivah Archives





# Rabbi Chaim Yisroel Blumenfeld

knows a thing or two about what the Holy Land can do for kids.

Fifty-five years ago, the teenage Yisroel (then Pete) was there on a yearlong study program when an encounter with a young *kollel* scholar named Rav Noah Weinberg turned him on to Torah, initiating a lifelong relationship with the man whose name would later become synonymous with Jewish outreach. Five years later, Yisroel's father made the trip to Israel to visit his son, who had by then become a Torah scholar. Upon finally meeting Rav Noah, the elder Blumenfeld's first words were, "I've been waiting five years to punch you in the nose."

Instead, the two embraced.

In an ironic turnabout, the young man whose odyssey of Jewish return initially put him at odds with his parents has spent nearly four decades working to infuse new life into teens who've had their own fallings-out with distraught parents. Yeshivah Neveh Zion was founded in 1977, and since joining its staff a year later, Reb Yisroel — known affectionately by generations of Neveh students as "the Mash," shorthand for *mashgiach ruchani* — has navigated the school through both calm and turbulent times while helping thousands of young Jewish men succeed in leading fully Jewish, productive lives.

Meeting Reb Yisroel for the first time, you might find his soft-spoken demeanor both disarming and a bit unexpected. Is this low-key individual really an important figure on the Anglo-Israel *kiruv* scene and a prime *talmid* of two of the Torah world's greatest builders of men, Rav Shlomo Wolbe and Rav Noah Weinberg, too? The short answer is yes.

If anything, Reb Yisroel's placid personality proves that external charisma and glib talk aren't necessary to reach kids who are thought to be unreachable. Far more important are the keys he learned from the masters: Look beyond the sometimes unappealing surface to focus on a boy's *penimiyus*. Listen to him as if there's no one else in the world instead of thinking of what you'll say next. And feel love, always abundant love, for the precious *neshamah* standing in front of you.



Reb Yisroel's secret: Listen to him as if there's no one else in the world, instead of thinking of what you'll say next

**They've Been Kidnapped** As recounted by Yonoson Rosenblum in his soon-to-appear biography of Rav Noah Weinberg, it was in the summer of 1961 that Yisroel and twin brother Mordechai (then Mike), first met Reb Noach. Pete and Mike were both attending yearlong Jewish leadership programs in Israel, having held leadership positions in Young Judea, a nonpartisan Zionist youth movement (Pete-Yisroel was a past national president). Both too were headed the following year for the Ivy League, at Harvard and Columbia respectively.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Cambridge. Rav Noah and his *chavrusa* in the ITRI *kollel* in Romema, fellow future *kiruv* giant Rav Nota Schiller, literally went looking for young Jews to learn with, and found Mordechai Blumenfeld. He began learning with either Rav Nota or Rav Noah every Thursday night, and one week Rav Noah had a long conversation with Mordechai in which he prevailed upon him to quit his program in favor of full-time learning.

That very night, Mordechai headed over to Yisroel's place and spent five hours trying to convince his brother to join him. Yisroel listened intently and the next morning, headed off to a four-day *tiyul* in the Negev with his program. It would be his last — because over those four days, fighting the desert heat and a fever, too, he decided that Harvard would have to give way to his need to grow in Jewish knowledge.

The Blumenfelds moved into the Chevron yeshivah dorm in Geula, and thus was launched the legendary *kiruv* career of Rav Noah Weinberg. As Rosenblum writes, the "defection of a national president and state president, each of whom had been accepted to an Ivy League university, sent shock waves through Young Judea." The group wired the Blumenfeld parents that their children had been kidnapped by bearded fanatics, and that the parents should demand that their children, both still under 18, return home.

The Blumenfeld boys' decision hit their





father hard. A Depression-era high school dropout, he saw his kids' Ivy League futures as ensuring they'd have a better life than he had working in the Merchant Marine. It took a trip to the Blumenfeld home in Connecticut by a friend of Rav Nota to allay their father's fears. Reb Yisroel has no doubt that the basis for his attraction to Torah was the fact that his parents "were always very much involved in Jewish things. My father wrote letters to the editor all the time to the New Haven papers about Israel. And after my brother, my sister, and I became religious, my parents did too."

The boys continued to learn with Rabbis Schiller and Weinberg, but Rav Noah also paired them up with some of Jerusalem's outstanding young *talmidei chachamim*, such as Rav Hillel Zaks and Rav Refoel Reichman. Nearly every Shabbos was spent in the Weinbergs' home, and Reb Yisroel recalls the profound effect those experiences had on him:

"At his home I experienced Shabbos for the first time in all its beauty and majesty. Until today, I recall the way he spoke to his



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Rebbetzin and children with such respect and the way they spoke to him. Such love, respect, and wisdom that I remember thinking to myself I'd be a fool not to emulate these values."

At the end of their year in Israel, Yisroel and his brother returned to the United States. They had met Rav Noah's brother, Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, on one of his visits to Israel, and decided to attend his yeshivah, Baltimore's Ner Israel. But while Mordechai remained there for two years, followed by eight years at the Ner Israel branch in Toronto, Yisroel spent just one year in Baltimore before returning to Eretz Yisrael.

He enrolled in Yeshivas Be'er Yaakov and became a close *talmid* of Rav Shlomo Wolbe. He learned there until just before the outbreak of the Six Day War in 1967. And throughout, he kept up a close connection with Rav Noah, frequently spending his *bein hazmanim* in the Weinberg home. The two would learn together throughout Thursday night before davening together in a sunrise minyan.

Eventually, he returned to the States, and

when it was time to find a life's partner, Rav Wolbe advised that as a *baal teshuvah*, he should look for someone with roots in the *frum* community. He married Tzipora Halberg of Monsey, a *talmidah* of the famed Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, and "it is her devotion to my work," Reb Yisroel says, "that makes it all possible, and it is her skill and guidance, as well, that has enabled us to raise our seven beautiful children."

On a visit to his brother in Toronto, Reb Yisroel heard a *shiur* by Rav Yaakov Weinberg, who had assumed the helm of Ner Israel's branch there, and thought to himself, "I'm staying here." His six years there included a stint in *kollel* and as a *rebbe* in the high school, and he went on from there to teach in high schools in St. Louis and Miami.

**Even Basketball** At the time, in the early '70s, about a third of a high school graduating class would go to Eretz Yisrael, some to Sha'alvim or Kerem B'Yavne (KBY), others to Yeshivat HaKotel or Beis

Medrash L'Torah (BMT). "But," Reb Yisroel explains, "only those capable of learning three *sedorim* would go. Those not able to do that would go to college, and a lot of them were lost. They needed Eretz Yisrael as much, if not more, than the others, but there was nowhere for them to go.

"Then, when one of the *talmidim* in Miami came back and said he had gone to Neveh Yehoshua (as it was then known), I realized this is the kind of yeshivah I was thinking about. Here was a place that catered to guys who weren't ready to sit and learn all day but needed a good atmosphere in Eretz Yisrael. Meanwhile, the *menahel* at that time was looking to hire a *menahel ruchani* and asked Rav Nosson Kamenetsky for suggestions. He, in turn, asked his cousin, Rav Wolbe, who mentioned my name."

From the day he joined Neveh until today, Rabbi Blumenfeld's goals have remained remarkably constant: To take the boys who have

no place to go, working with each at his own level and his own pace. He says that "in many *mosdos*, they start off taking weaker boys and then, when they get to a point where they can attract better boys, they stop taking weaker boys. But I wouldn't allow that, because our entire essence is to provide a place for those who need this specific environment."

Once, Reb Yisroel remembers, Israel's president, Yitzhak Navon, came to visit the yeshivah and said he wanted to talk to the boys, not the *rebbeim*.

"Afterward he came over to me and said, 'What's going on over here? These boys actually like it here.' I told him that's our *tachlis*. He said, 'So how do you do it?' I said we try to find what is special in each *bochur* and we connect with that and try to rebuild his self-confidence, which, in most cases, he lost while going through 'the system.' And through that we create a rapport with him. Navon asked, 'And what if the only thing you find is

*kadur sal* (basketball)?' That too, I replied."

Everything about Neveh is geared to the overriding goal of connecting to the individual *talmid* — even Rabbi Blumenfeld's "Mash" moniker (it's even part of his e-mail address). "They started calling me *mashgiach ruchani*," he says a bit sheepishly, "and I said, 'Come on... make it Mash.' I didn't want to be intimidating. The *hanhalah* made me wear one of these hats" — pointing to the homburg atop his head — "but the frock they never convinced me to wear. I could never relate if I had to wear a frock."

**Where's the Idealism?** A cornerstone of the Mash's approach is to view a boy's entrance into Neveh not as a second chance, but a first one. In other words, he comes with a genuinely clean slate, and whatever baggage he may have brought with him from his life until that point is simply nonexistent in Reb Yisroel's eyes.

One boy in his *shiur* — whom he knew had spent much of his senior year getting to know the principal’s office really well — started off the year by not showing up for the first several days. Finally, Reb Yisroel paid a visit to the dorm and sat down on the boy’s bed.

“Are you feeling better?” he asked.  
“Who told you I was sick?”

“No one, but you impressed me as a guy who came here to accomplish, not to vegetate. When you didn’t show, I figured you’re under the weather, so I came to see how you’re doing.” That was the last day he missed.

Dealing with boys from difficult backgrounds calls for a *rebbe* to possess two interrelated traits: an ability to look at a young man and see beyond the here and now to the potential within, and infinite patience while that potential lies untapped. Rabbi Blumenfeld smiles as he recalls one Five Towns *talmid* who didn’t step into the Neveh *beis medrash* until sometime in May. As the months went by, however, the *rebbeim* kept the door open, speaking and learning with the boy at every opportunity. He returned for a second year to learn with *hasmadah*, and is today a *mechanech* of note.

A school whose mission statement is to serve as a safe haven for the boys other schools won’t work with will, by definition, feel the changes in the surrounding society — usually for the worse — and that will be reflected in the kind of boys applying for admission. But the yeshivah’s mission of meeting boys where they are has to remain the same.

Rabbi Blumenfeld gives the example of drug use to illustrate how Neveh Zion has had to adapt to changing circumstances. “In the beginning, the boys who came to us had gotten into trouble previously only because they were disillusioned with the system. But eventually, drugs became an issue and we worked very, very hard to keep the boys away from it. Sometimes we were successful and sometimes not. We saved a lot of boys’ lives by convincing them to enter rehab.

“Also, it used to be that most of our boys were coming from Modern Orthodox schools even though there were other, more Zionist *mosdos* like KBY and HaKotel, because we

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Today, they don’t care about Israel, Zionism, anything besides instant gratification. And now, with the technological advances, the problem is very serious. I mean, they’re just interested in their screens”

were very quiet about our chareidi orientation. After all, these kids need to hear about *shemiras Shabbos*, not those issues. Besides, I was in *miluim* for 12 years and had a very Zionist background, so I was able to relate to them on those issues, too.

“Now, however, there are something like 30 yeshivos catering to Modern Orthodox kids. And in those places, the parents don’t have to worry that their kid might end up in the Mir, whereas in Neveh, they have to worry about that.”

But it’s not simply a proliferation of yeshivos that has largely dried up the stream of boys coming to Neveh from more modern backgrounds. Another major factor is the loss of idealism and sense of Jewish belonging, both stemming from the dulling of mind and soul that unrestrained materialism and use of social media have wrought.

Reb Yisroel observes that “when Zionism was stronger in the States, our work was easier, because we were able to ask a boy, ‘Why do you love the Land? What makes it so special?’ and that’s a great introduction to Torah and mitzvos. Today, they don’t care about Israel, Zionism, anything. What has changed over the years? Someone said that today, every *dor* lasts just three years, and in this pre-Mashiach era, things are changing very, very rapidly. The boys used to at least come with a love of the Land, and we would take them on *tiyulim*. I always went on all the *tiyulim*, talking to the boys about all the places we’d visit. Even today, I believe that if you can get them to feel something for the Land, that it will spark something.

“But as time went on,” Reb Yisroel continues, “the boys became uninterested in anything besides instant gratification. And now, with the technological advances, the problem is very serious. I mean, they’re just interested in their screens. Society today is very superficial, and so a boy with social problems hides behind the screen, where it’s much safer, instead of learning how to relate to others.

“I once asked a boy, ‘Do you ever discuss a problem with a friend over Facebook?’ He answered, ‘I don’t wanna hear their problems. I just wanna know what’s going down [i.e., what’s happening].’ We have to teach many of these boys the basics of how to relate and how to speak to people. One night a week, we teach the boys about topics like dating, marriage, and raising children. I believe every yeshivah should do it, because it’s mind-boggling how the boys today, even those in the very best yeshivos, are unprepared when it comes to basic *hashkafos* of day-to-day life.”

So, explains Reb Yisroel, the really difficult boys have stopped coming. “Why should they come? There’s no initiative, no love of the Land, so they’d rather stay home and sit in front of their screens. They don’t need to escape from parents because parents have no control anyhow. They feel they have everything they need in America.”

**Staying Inspired** When Rabbi Blumenfeld saw that Neveh was no longer attracting the type of boy it once had in

large numbers, he did what he’s always done: He adapted to a changed reality. He asked *mechanchim* in the United States what need they felt his yeshivah could best address, and they said what’s needed most is a place for the growing number of boys who are not in trouble, but are Jewishly uninspired.

These are kids who toe the line and aren’t into drugs — but aren’t into Yiddishkeit, either. They might be keeping Shabbos, but certainly don’t appreciate it and might even be texting on Shabbos. They will finish high school, go to college, where they might even start dating non-Jewish girls and be lost to Yiddishkeit.

And so, several years ago, Neveh Zion became two very different programs in two separate locations. The smaller of the two, located in Jerusalem, is for the kind of boys Neveh has always served. Under the direction of Rabbi Yitz Tandler, the boys learn in the mornings and early afternoons and, later in the day,

engage in a variety of activities, from visiting sick kids in hospitals and packing boxes for Yad Eliezer to musical jam sessions and *tiyulim*.

The second program, known as Tiferes Zion, is based at Neveh’s longtime campus in Telshe Stone. Its 50 *talmidim* are a mix of boys from *yeshivish*, *chassidish*, and Modern Orthodox families. Many of them attended mainstream yeshivos from which, in many cases, they did not graduate.

Some of them, in fact, have had a very good background in learning, but just aren’t doing much else Yiddishkeit-wise. Initially, the boys engage in one-on-one learning to enable them to develop a rapport with a *rebbe*. Later in the year, they attend both an advanced *iyun shiur* along with a faster-paced one that follows the V’Haarev Na format for Gemara retention that has met with great success in many yeshivah high schools in the United States.

How did *frum* boys from mainstream schools end up this way? The Mash points to

a number of factors. “The family today isn’t what it was years ago and a lot of boys come from broken or dysfunctional homes. There are some very good parents, but there are others who need our yeshivah as much as the boys do. There are parents, for example, who, although the boy now keeps Shabbos and is beginning to enjoy learning, are not going to be happy until the boy puts on *chassidish levush*. So he gets no positive reinforcement, which is crazy.

“And then there’s the *bochur* who feels that his *rebbeim* were just interested in saying their *shiur* and didn’t care if they were talking to the wall. So in his mind, they were not really teaching, and as a result he fell by the wayside. The fact is that some *bochurim* don’t even know how to read, but they get away with it because no one is really paying attention.”

Trying to keep the technology issue under control is a huge challenge, because, says Reb Yisroel, “as soon as we find a way to block their devices, they come back the next year



with something new. We try to get them into learning and convince them that although it says *shelo asani eved*, with technology you're making *yourself* an *eved*. We try to give them incentives if they give up their phones — all three of them — before Shabbos.”

On Leil Shabbos, every student eats out at the home of either a *rebbe* or one of the seven or eight families in Telshe Stone who are alumni of the yeshivah. For many of them, the experience of a home where Shabbos is something beautiful, a day to be enjoyed and excited about, is a true eye-opener. At the school's grand *siyum* this year, one boy got up and shared a feeling from the heart that spoke for many of his peers: “People say, ‘Don’t judge Judaism by Jews.’ But that’s because they never went to Neveh. Here, you *can* judge Judaism by Jews — by the *rebbeim* and their families.”

**Trying to Stay Afloat** For an institution specializing in boys other schools don’t want to deal with, Neveh Zion’s alumni have done remarkably well for themselves. With an alumni body numbering some 2,000 *talmidim*, Reb Yisroel estimates that over 200 of them hold important positions in *chinuch* and *rabbanus*. As was true for Rabbi Blumenfeld himself, tasting Torah’s sweetness for the first time in Eretz Yisrael has led many of the alumni — about 180 by his count — to settle there, some going into business, some still learning and yet others serving as *klei kodesh*.

Whatever path in life they’ve taken, the alumni continue to have a strong bond with the yeshivah, and many maintain an ongoing relationship with the *rebbeim*. One *rebbe*, Rabbi Dovid Sternberg, has daily learning sessions by phone or Skype with no fewer than ten former *talmidim*. That sense of loyalty also translates into significant financial support for the yeshivah.

Yet unlike other institutions, Rabbi Blumenfeld observes, “we don’t have a natural constituency from which to fundraise. We’re not *yeshivish*, we’re not Modern Orthodox, we’re not producing classic *baalei teshuvah*. The big names in the Five Towns? They don’t

know me. Perhaps it’s a mistake, but I count on the alumni, and they have kept the yeshivah going, no question about that.”

But the unusually strong commitment of Neveh graduates to their alma mater is also an outgrowth of one of the themes of the yeshivah’s *chinuch*: a Jew’s responsibility to the Jewish People. With a touch of pride, Rabbi Blumenfeld mentions that on a recent stay with a family in the Five Towns, the son, who had been a mischievous sort during his time at Neveh, disappeared from the house on Motzaei Shabbos. The Mash was mystified — until he learned that the young man performs *taharos* with the local *chevra kaddisha*.

At an age when others might be slowing down and beginning to consider their retirement options, in recent years Reb Yisroel has had to take up the figurative wandering stick in search of support for the yeshivah. It’s not a reality he’s happy about. “I wish I could do a better job on both ends. When I’m in America, I’m totally consumed with creating a base of support from *balabatim*. And when I’m in the yeshivah, although I keep saying I need to take some time to continue the fundraising efforts, it doesn’t happen. When a boy says he wants to talk, I can’t say I need to call some guy for a donation, so I end up spending all my time talking with and teaching the boys. It’s just very hard to do both.”

With Reb Yisroel’s growing involvement in fundraising requiring more frequent trips abroad, many of the functions of *mashgiach* have been assumed by Rabbi Avrohom Yaakov Schwab, son of the legendary *mashgiach* of the Gateshead yeshivah. “He probably could have had a position in Gateshead,” Reb Yisroel muses, “but he chose to save lives instead. He talks to the boys, takes them for walks, really gets to know them. He has a tremendous influence on them and their parents.”

**An Entire World** But anyone who thinks Rabbi Yisroel Blumenfeld is going to content himself with arranging parlor meetings and matching donors to fund Neveh’s existing programs doesn’t know what makes the man tick. When he speaks of his own two *rebbeim*, Rav Shlomo

Wolbe and Rav Noah Weinberg, he highlights that what those two greats shared in common was the quality of being what he calls “proactive *ovdei Hashem*.” It’s an apt phrase to describe their *talmid*, too.

Just weeks ago, the Mash sent an e-mail to everyone in the Neveh orbit that posed the question Rav Noah always asked, which echoes in the ears of his very first *kiruv* success story: “There is a spiritual Holocaust out there. Am I doing enough?” Reb Yisroel noted that it had been an outstanding year for both of Neveh’s divisions, but that “outside, in the world of those who do not make it to Israel or who fail to find the proper follow-up when they return, it was not a good year... a bad year for overdosing, and for the percentage of young people leaving the fold. Perhaps that’s why, nearly every morning when I wake at 5:30 a.m., I often start thinking, ‘what can we do?’”

That thought propelled him to push the launch of a third-year program at both Neveh campuses. The one at Tiferes Zion will focus on training young men 20 and over to do *kiruv kerovim*. The other will give current *talmidim* the opportunity to spend an unprecedented third year learning and working in Eretz Yisrael.

The latter initiative is related to a problem with which Reb Yisroel has grappled for some time: How to sustain a boy’s growth in *ruchniyus* post-Neveh. “Some of these boys can’t go back to the States because of the friends they left behind. So we’re working on creating an infrastructure using our alumni as mentors and *chavrusas*, and we’ve been successful with that in Baltimore, where we have very active, Torah-focused alumni. If I had the money, I’d have people in four different cities working with the boys who come back.”

What keeps Reb Yisroel so upbeat about boys others gave up on, that even after 40 years at Neveh he’s still busy innovating programs for them? As always with the Mash, the answer is understated, but overpowering: “It’s a wonderful thing to change a person’s life, but why do Chazal *davka* refer to it as *‘k’ilu kiyeim olam malei*,’ as if one has sustained an entire world? Because if you treat him like the *olam malei* he is, you’ll be able to save him. That’s my *vort*. And that’s my *derech*, too.” ●