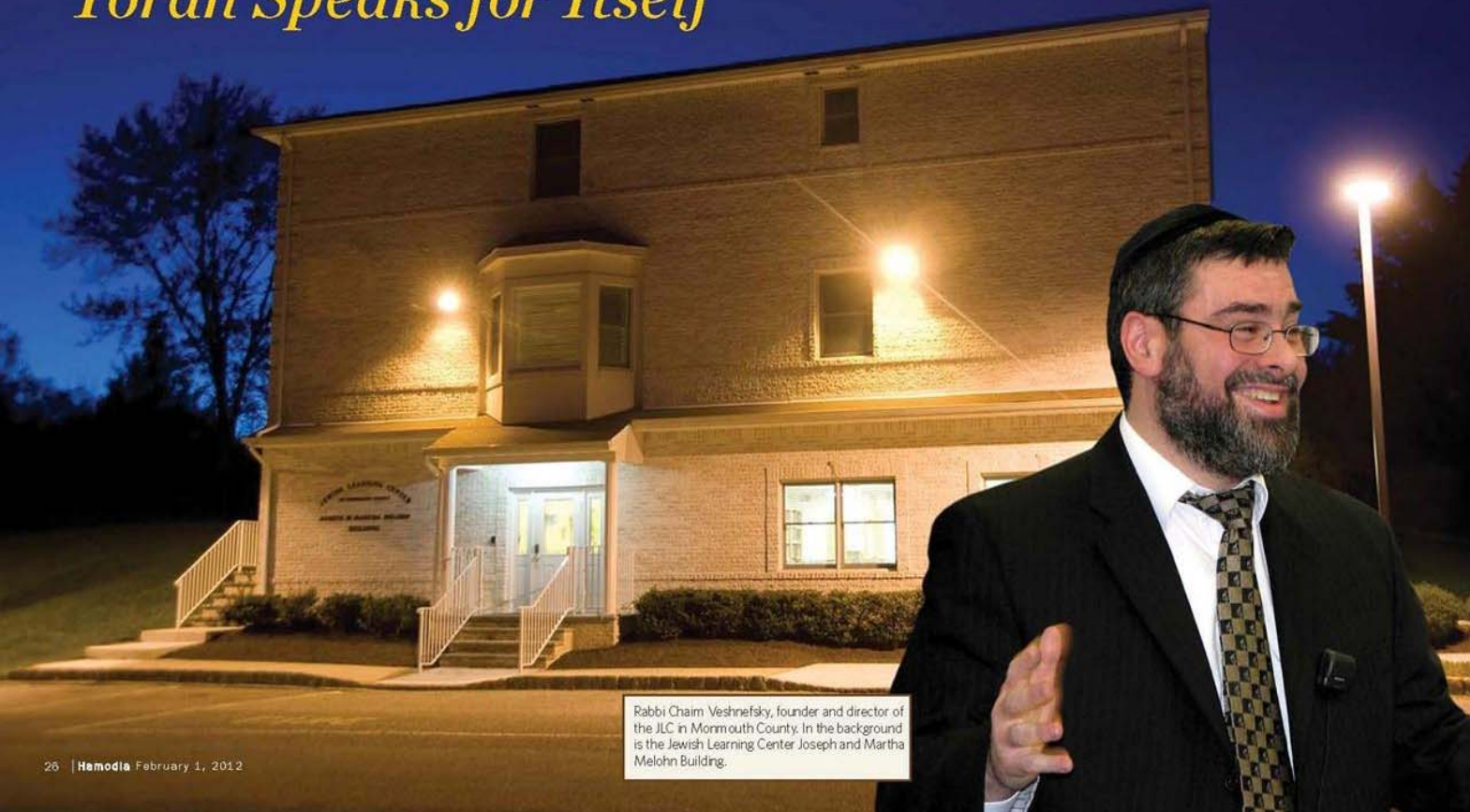


Jewish Learning Center of Monmouth County

Torah Speaks for Itself



Rabbi Chaim Veshnefsky, founder and director of the JLC in Monmouth County. In the background is the Jewish Learning Center Joseph and Martha Melohn Building.

BY ESTHER PERKAL

February 2008: The reception hall is filled to capacity; the clink of silverware and crystal resonates pleasantly with soft background music, punctuated by earnest conversation and laughter. An excited hush settles over the assembled, and the atmosphere is electrifying as the guest of honor at the eleventh annual dinner of the Jewish Learning Center (JLC) of Monmouth County ascends to the podium.

“Gamar u’meshabed lei!” The final words of Bava Basra and Talmud Bavli come alive as Mr. Herschel Zoberg completes his final masechta in Shas. Mr. Zoberg was not raised in an environment conducive to Torah study and never attended yeshivah. But the impact that the Jewish Learning Center and its esteemed spiritual leader, Rabbi Chaim Gedalya Veshnefsky, has had on him and on his family impelled him to begin — and eventually to complete — what many others, even those raised observant, never accomplish.

Tears of unbridled joy and gratification streamed from the eyes of many as Zoberg recited the Hadran and Kaddish. The final cry of “Amen,” followed by ringing shouts of “Mazal tov,” stimulated a round of exhilarating singing and dancing, a demonstration of true simchas haTorah. Those stirring words continue to echo, inspiring many others in Manalapan — and elsewhere — to be mekabel Torah.

A Weekly Class Becomes A Mission

Twenty years ago, a Lakewood *kollel yungerman* by the name of Rabbi Chaim Veshnfsky joined the Me'or Kiruv Training Program in Deal, New Jersey. At the close of one session there was a request for a volunteer to teach a Judaism class at CMI Computers in Manalapan, New Jersey. Of the twenty-five participants, Rabbi Veshnfsky was the only one who responded, little dreaming that an hourlong weekly class would develop into his life's mission.

The class, which covered basic questions in Jewish philosophy, began with a group of six people but expanded in time to more than fifty participants.

A year later, the eighty-year-old Freehold Jewish Center appealed to Rabbi Veshnfsky to found a community Jewish education

program. Rabbi Veshnfsky gladly agreed and began with lectures and a *chavrusa* program. This eventually spiraled into his own independent adult education program, which he named the Jewish Learning Center of Monmouth County.

Eighteen miles north of Lakewood and sixteen miles south of Highland Park, New Jersey, Manalapan is a stunning suburban district, attractive for its breathtaking rural scenery, friendly community-style atmosphere, zero crime rate, and inexpensive housing.

The JLC continued to expand, adding Torah classes and programs to meet the growing educational needs of the Jewish community of Manalapan and prompting Rabbi Veshnfsky to relocate with his family to central Manalapan, where he erected a brand-new building to house the JLC, the Joseph and Martha Melohn Phase I

Building. Built on a six-acre property surrounded by lush green scenery, the JLC houses the shul and Learning Center on the ground floor, and the Veshnfskys live upstairs.

Initially, Lakewood *bachurim* spent Shabbos there every week to complete a *minyán*, but this has long since become unnecessary. The *frum* community in Manalapan has expanded to include dozens of local *baalei teshuvah* as well as those from observant homes who have moved to Manalapan to benefit from its inviting quality of life and to contribute to the growth of a burgeoning Torah community.

And a Torah community is what it is. At the JLC, beginning learners are introduced to the complexity and intricacy of Torah from the very start. One of Rabbi Veshnfsky's most popular *shiurim* is *Chumash b'yayun*, attended by people from a wide range

of religious backgrounds and levels of education. After a decade of study, they celebrated a *siyum* on *Chumash Bereishis* and completed *Parashas Shemos*. The next two years were devoted to *Parashas Va'eira*.

"*Chachmas haTorah* really blows people away," asserts Rabbi Veshnfsky, a *talmid* of Rav Dovid Soloveitchik of Brisk, *shlita*, and Rav Reuven Feinstein, *shlita*. "Often, when we learn *Chumash*, as familiar as we are with the story line, we fail to notice the many queries abounding in the *pesukim*. Over the course of a decade, our *shiur* has posed over ten thousand questions and answered nearly every single one."

Rabbi Veshnfsky prepares each *shiur* with an average of fifteen to twenty *meforshim*. He once searched fifty *sefarim* to discover the answer to a single *kashah* that arose about *Makkas Barad*.

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"Torah excites everyone — from a preschool child to a centenarian. When we demonstrate that every question has an answer, they appreciate Torah as absolute truth. And it is all the more meaningful when they are the ones to formulate the questions. ... There are so many Jews who have become *frum* just by learning *Chumash*," he exclaims, his voice laden with emotion.

Rabbi Veshnfsky's *shiurim* are limited neither to *Chumash* nor to the JLC. A *talmid chacham* and historian, he frequently offers classes and lecture series in libraries and in private homes on parenting, relationships, and even other world religions, refuting them completely and proving Judaism as *emes*. He concludes lectures with an invitation to make use of the many available learning options — both lectures and one-on-one *chavrusa* study — at the JLC.

Catering to men and women of all levels and learning styles, JLC offers *shiurim* in *Chumash*, *Gemara*, *Mishnah*, *Minchas Chinuch*, *hashkafah*, and other topics. Rabbi Veshnfsky is prepared to broach any topic or deal with any sensitive question or issue, whether it is related to *emunah*, history, philosophy, *halachah*, or text. He welcomes questions and those who ask them, whether they are *frum* or unaffiliated.

Unfortunately, it is no secret that many adolescents in the Torah world suffer doubts and hesitate to ask questions for fear of being shunned, but they find a listening ear and clear, logical answers in the Veshnfsky home and at the JLC.

A Growing Torah Community

Throughout the past two decades, the Veshnfskys have touched the lives of over six thousand Jews, guiding many to become fully observant,

Rabbi Baruch Sher, *menahel* of Manalapan's new Bais Yaakov, affixes a *mezuzah* to the building.



The *chavrusa* program at the JLC.

ehrlische Yidden. Initially, families who took the leap to full observance would depart to mainstream *frum* communities such as Far Rockaway, Monsey, Highland Park, Passaic, and even Lakewood; but since the Veshnefskys moved into the community, Manalapan has become a feasible home for a Torah-true family. They have successfully launched dozens of weekly Torah classes and community *chessed* projects, erected an *eruv*, sent dozens of Jewish children to learn in day schools, *chadarim*, Bais Yaakovs, and yeshivos, and founded a Hebrew school for Jewish public-school children, which serves as a stepping stone to their entrance into religious institutions.

This past September, with the tireless assistance of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Rubinfeld of Torah Umesorah, the JLC proudly opened the very first class of the Bais Yaakov of Western Monmouth County in Freehold, which, appropriately, is currently renting the newly renovated ground floor of the Freehold Jewish Center, one of the

JLC's early locations. While the first-year class has opened with six students in pre-1A, next year's registration promises a full class.

"When I first approached my father-in-law with my vision of a *cheder* or Bais Yaakov, he thought it might be premature," relates Rabbi Baruch Sher of Lakewood, Rabbi Veshnefsky's eldest son-in-law and principal of the brand-new Bais Yaakov.

But Reb Baruch persisted, emphasizing that Torah institutions are the building blocks of an authentic *frum* community, which is the long-term goal of the Manalapan Jewish community. Plans are in the offing for a *cheder* as well.

All-Encompassing *Ahavas Yisrael*

The other side of the coin in *kiruv* is *ahavas Yisrael*, Rebbetzin Ruthie Veshnefsky says.

"The secular world is often so cold, harsh, and narcissistic. Dysfunctional families are commonplace, and even when there is mutual love and respect, parents often don't know how to relate to and educate their children. People are amazed and touched when they realize that we really care about them. They are inspired by the warmth and camaraderie, the honor expressed between husband and wife, and the respect shown by the children."

Her husband, who also runs parenting classes and meets privately

with couples to counsel them in child-rearing, jokes that his wife accomplishes much more by running her "catering business," although she doesn't get paid for it. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Rebbetzin Veshnefsky cooks for dozens of guests each Shabbos and has catered many a Yom Tov *seudah*, Chanukah *mesibah*, and *simchah* — even weddings. The whole family is involved; even nine-year-old Ephraim prepares the potato kugel every week.

The annual Purim *seudah*, attended by close to a hundred people, is always a rousing event. The joyous singing and dancing dissolve barriers, and those who are not yet observant are

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inevitably astounded by the power of true Jewish *simchah* and the conduct of Torah Jews on a festive occasion — a stark contrast to secular holiday get-togethers.

While "Veshnefsky Catering" may not bring in a monetary profit, it will certainly be recompensed in the *Olam Ha'emes*.

Inspiring Within and Without

The shul's annual dinner is a hallmark event of inspiration and poignancy, impelling participants to commit to further spiritual growth. Each year the honorees — community members who have taken life-altering steps — ascend the podium to share their personal stories and journeys.

Two years ago it was Herschel Zoberg, who celebrated a *siyum haShas* after encountering Judaism at the JLC. Last year the honorees were Dr. Ted and Lorinda Lidksy, a couple who traversed the road back to Torah Judaism later in life. The Lidksys had lived in Manalapan for years but moved to Atlantic Highlands after their retirement.

"We were totally secular; Shabbos was Saturday, a day to clean the garage and mow the lawn. I would have faster become a Martian than Orthodox," Dr. Lidksy relates with a chuckle.

A brief stop at Levy's kosher pizza shop in Manalapan (owned by another JLC *talmid*) led to an encounter with Rabbi Veshnefsky, who promptly invited him to attend the *Chumash shiur*. Dr. Lidksy became a regular at the hourlong evening class, furtively slipping out of the building before anyone could rope him into staying for *Maariv*.

One evening as he was making his silent escape, he was tapped on the shoulder and told, "We need a tenth man." He was very apprehensive until seventeen-year-old Dovid Veshnefsky greeted him warmly, handed him a *siddur*, and pointed to the place. "Davening was a deeply emotional

Rabbi Veshnefsky jokes that his wife accomplishes more than he does by running her "catering business."



The new Bais Yaakov school in Monmouth County.



Ted Lidsky (L) and Yossi Stamler spend quality time learning Torah.

On visiting the school's open house, Lorinda Lidsky gestured expansively and said with feeling, "This is my investment; these are my children."

experience ... the first time I *davened* with a *minyan* in a half-century, since my bar mitzvah."

Three years later, the Lidskys are *frum* and have moved back to Manalapan to join the growing community. They are generous supporters of the new Bais Yaakov. On visiting the school's open house, Lorinda Lidsky gestured expansively and said with feeling, "This is my investment; these are my children."

Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Schwab of Philadelphia, Rabbi Veshnefsky's childhood mentor and first *rebbe*, who

has visited the JLC on numerous occasions to speak and meet with its members, commends the center and reaps much *nachas* from his *talmid's* remarkable accomplishments.

"Rabbi Veshnefsky is a sterling *talmid chacham* and a dynamic individual who has inspired many to become full-fledged Torah Yidden. He motivates his students far beyond his own teaching. He trains beginners as yeshivah *bachurim*, encouraging them to learn on their own, to make *siyumim* and finish *Shas*. His *kehillah's* accomplishments in Torah are truly inspirational."

One of the most outstanding qualities of the Manalapan community is that its members are always striving to grow; they do not want to remain in place, stagnating in their *Yiddishkeit*. Why is that?

Says Rabbi Sher, "Because Rabbi Veshnefsky presents a brilliant model for *shteiging* and personal growth. One can't help but be inspired to *shteig* and grow as well."

"One of the foundations in teaching and outreach is never to give up," Rabbi Veshnefsky asserts. He tells the story of a couple in his community who became *frum* when they were already well into their fifties. At the time, they had two daughters, both in their twenties.

"I once asked them, 'You're *frum*, but what about your daughters?' They replied, 'They're adults. What can we do?' I told them, 'Don't give up. The Torah speaks for itself!'"

The JLC sent both young women on a three-week Aish HaTorah program in Israel, and today one is *frum* and living in Deal, where she sends her three children to yeshivah institutions. In a voice full of emotion, Rabbi Veshnefsky relates that he recently received a picture of their granddaughter receiving her first *siddur*.

A Representative Couple

Yossi and Priva Stamler are recent arrivals in Manalapan. Although



Mitchell Berko, a member of the JLC community, at a *hachnasas sefer Torah*.

raised in a mainstream yeshivah system in the heart of Boro Park, Yossi never really developed a love of learning. He says that when they first considered moving to Manalapan, Rabbi Veshnefsky emphasized that the community was seeking growth-oriented individuals who love to learn. "I identified with the idea of growth, but learning? That just wasn't for me," Yossi says.

Rabbi Veshnefsky's dynamic Shabbos *drashah*, which covers a major part of the *parashah*, piqued Yossi's excitement and motivated him to get back on the learning track.

"Once, I hardly learned at all; today, I learn with five *chavrusas* a day and attend *shiurim* as well," he states. Before, during and after his workday on Wall Street, whether in the office, on the phone, or on the bus, Yossi learns — *Navi* with *meforshim*, *Mesillas Yesharim*, *Mishnayos*, and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*.

Rabbi Sher describes the Stamlers as deeply entrenched in *kiruv* and *chesed* projects, pillars of their community

who represent the fact that Torah Jews are regular people who are constantly living and learning.

On that inspirational evening when Herschel Zoberg made his *siyum haShas*, Stamler announced his resolution to complete *Shas* as well. "If he, who never learned in yeshivah, can do it, then certainly I can too," he said. Since then, he has taken to learning *maseches Makkos* and *Brachos* and will make his own *siyum*, *iy"H*, in several years, creating additional waves of Torah and inspiring others in Manalapan and beyond. ■

For more information about the Jewish Learning Center, please contact Rabbi Veshnefsky at rabbiv@jkwet.net or at (908) 770-3502.

For assistance or questions related to *kiruv*, please call the Oz Nidberu *Kiruv* Hotline at 1-800-98 KIRUV.

For comments and suggestions related to the *The World of Kiruv* column, you are invited to e-mail kiruvupdate@gmail.com.