

No matter how busy he is, no matter how many directions he's being pulled in or how many people are clamoring for his attention, when Rav Yochanan Zweig speaks with you, you have his undivided interest. As the human connection to Torah for so many types of Jews in Miami Beach, the Rosh Yeshivah says he has a sacred obligation to each one — to help all of them become the best Jews they can be

Early Riser

BY *Binyamin Rose, Miami Beach*
PHOTOS *Angel Valentin*



The five-minute drive from mainland Miami to Miami Beach across the Julia Tuttle Causeway is always breathtaking. The waters of Biscayne Bay dance on both sides of the causeway in sparkling hues of blue and green depending on the sky's mix of sun and clouds. Year-round sunlight refracts off the pastel-colored art deco buildings dotting the skyline. It's a view that I enjoyed when commuting to work before leaving Miami Beach to make aliyah 21 years ago.

There was one noticeable change, however, when I returned on assignment last month. The name that graces the first building upon arriving in Miami Beach is the Talmudic University on the Rohr Campus. I can't think of any other city whose welcome sign, so to speak, is the name of a yeshivah.

The lettering I always remembered on this midrise building said Howard Johnson, a budget hotel and restaurant chain famed for serving 28 flavors of ice cream long before Häagen-Dazs and Ben and Jerry's overtook them. Today, the Talmudic University serves up daily portions of the 70 facets of Torah to its hungry students.

It's the Torah of its *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Yochanan Zweig, a synthesis of what he learned as a boy, waking up well before dawn to learn with his father, and the Torah of his famed Ner Israel mentors, Rav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman *ztz"l* and Rav Yaakov Weinberg *ztz"l*. It's the Torah that he honed in Bais Hatalmud in Yerushalayim, and after that with decades

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of experience training *talmidim* — always punctuated and delivered in a style that combines warmth with real-life guidance.

Listening to him again after a generation's absence brought back the feeling I always had with Rav Zweig: that no matter how busy he is, or how many people are hovering in his vicinity clamoring for attention, when he speaks with you, he is giving you his undivided attention.

“When people come to me, they are looking to be connected to the truth. I'm their connection to the Torah,” says Rav Zweig. “I have a sacred obligation to let them know that I care about them, that I'm involved, and want to help them become who they are capable of becoming.”

“Individual attention” is often a cliché on an organization's brochure. With Rav Zweig, it's his personal mission. Delivering a *shiur klali* to *bochurim* in the *beis medrash*, he is lively and animated.



UNDIVIDED ATTENTION The Rosh Yeshivah is totally engaged, whether it's with a small group in his office, guiding a full *beis medrash*, or even as a guide for *Mishpacha's* news editor



Speaking to a select *chaburah* of *bochurim* in a *shiur* about relationships he holds in his private office, the atmosphere is hushed as Rav Zweig leans forward to make a point, and back when composing his thoughts. When inspiring women to appreciate their self-sacrifice entailed in the mitzvah of *hachnassas orchim*, his delivery is gentle and soft-spoken.

It's now 40 years since Rav Yochanan and Rebbetzin Rifkah Zweig established a yeshivah in Miami Beach — a milestone the community celebrated this past Sunday at a gala dinner. The dinner drew well over 1,000 people — a crowd drawn not only from the yeshivah community itself, but from all over South Florida, across the country, and around the world — in a tribute to the universal respect the Zweigs are accorded.

In four decades, “the yeshivah” — as it's called by Miami Beach's thriving Orthodox community — has grown to become an integrated *chinuch* system from preschool to *kollel*, women's classes, night classes for *balabatim*, daily minyanim, and even a kosher food bank.

Rav Zweig has become a leading authority in this community marked by both harmony and a range of religious diversity — that's without the snowbirds who swell the winter population.

To these people, Rav Zweig dispenses advice at all hours of the day and night. Take a walk on the boardwalk at midnight and you might spot him meeting a community member to help smooth over a family crisis. Go to the same location at 5 a.m. and you might bump into him and his *rebbetzin* on an early morning walk, discussing his upcoming *shiur*.

A recently released Greater Miami Jewish Federation Population Study shows that 19,500 families — or 16 percent of Greater Miami Jewish households — are Orthodox. This provides the ever fertile ground that Rav Zweig waters, but his reach and influence are felt in all segments of the community.

“The concept of self-esteem and dealing

with other people often arises in his lectures,” says Saby Behar, a close confidant who, in his former role as chair of global operations at the Jewish Federations of North America, often relied on Rav Zweig to navigate complex challenges. “The *rav* always says that when you compare yourself to the rest of the world, you come up against situations where you often feel the need to elevate yourself, so you put the rest of the world down. He taught me that you don’t have to put the rest of the world down to elevate yourself.”

Rav Zweig says the ability and importance of relating to the wider world stems from a proper understanding of life’s true purpose and our task as Jews to make a positive impact on the world. “The *Mesillas Yesharim* talks about *tikkun achvas hamedinos*, ‘international brotherhood.’ Each era has an *avodas Hashem* that fits that era. If I can teach *bochurim* to learn better, and to go out in the community as *balabatim* and do something notable, then we have a whole new understanding of our potential.”

Developing Yourself Rav Zweig’s system is geared toward the complete development of a person, in both learning and interpersonal relations, says Shmulie Kosman, a *talmid* from Baltimore. “It’s about developing yourself as a Jew, and being a responsible person. We can embrace humankind, and it’s not something to be afraid of, or something that takes away from ourselves.”

Another *talmid*, Meir Perlmutter of Clifton, New Jersey, saw how the Rosh Yeshivah put this concept into action. One day, Joseph, one of the yeshivah’s maintenance men, approached Rav Zweig with a medical issue. “Joseph comes into the ‘Beis,’ and the Rosh Yeshivah gets up, takes out his phone, and puts him in contact with medical people. Joseph isn’t Jewish, but he’s a person. If the Rosh Yeshivah can be of help to anyone, he will do it.”

Personal warmth and caring about people of all stripes is in his blood. Rav Zweig’s great-grandfather on his mother’s side was Rav Yechezkel Taub of Kuzmir, founder of the Modzhitzer chassidic dynasty. Rav Zweig’s father, an American-born Orthodox Jew, worked with Rav Zweig’s grandfather in the family’s diamond trade. “Because my father was American-born, he also had to learn to deal with contemporary society,” says Rav Zweig.

Rav Zweig was born in Philadelphia in 1942, when the City of Brotherly Love was home to 275,000 Jews but not even one *cheder*. His grandfather would rise and shine at 5 a.m. to learn before davening and starting work. His grandmother, worried about how her children would stay Orthodox in a secular American environment, arranged private Torah tutors including a *baal korei* for Rav Zweig’s father.

“She figured if my father could *lein*, he would have to be in shul at least three times a week,” says Rav Zweig. Her foresight paid off twofold.

“Every single one of his linear descendants is *frum* today,” says Rav Zweig. “And this was the middle of the Depression, when unemployment was 25 percent. Nobody had any money, but my father was making \$10 a week reading from the Torah. That was a huge amount of money.”

When Rav Zweig was in elementary school, he would rise at 6 a.m. to learn with his father. “I had sleep apnea. I didn’t know what that was at the time. I just knew I was always tired. My father got up early to learn, so



The “*bochur* from Philly” surprisingly could hold his own with the older boys in Ner Israel, eventually becoming the pride of the *roshei yeshivah*. With Rav Ruderman and Rav Weinberg (middle); with his maternal grandfather Rabbi Zecharia Eilenberg (bottom)

every day, he'd have a cup of coffee when he was learning, and he'd make me a cup too."

Eventually his father founded Philadelphia's first yeshiva day school, Beth Jacob. Rav Zweig and seven classmates comprised its first graduating class in 1955. Diploma in hand, someone advised Rav Zweig's father to check out Ner Israel in Baltimore.

"My father drove me there without even knowing it didn't have a high school," recalls Rav Zweig. "And it was a shlep. In those days, it was a three-hour ride."

Rav Yaakov Weinberg *ztz"l* administered the *bechinah* to the youngster, who showed he could hold his own with older boys, thanks to some supplemental learning. "When the yeshiva in Philadelphia started — and this is before Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky got to Philadelphia — it was a ten-minute walk from my school. I would go there twice or three times a week to learn with older *bochurim*."

Rav Zweig entered Ner Israel in 1955, and continued to learn in its *kollel* until 1969. Both Rav Ruderman and his son-in-law Rav Weinberg (with whom Rav Zweig learned afternoon *sefer* for an entire year) took a special interest in the *bochur* from Philly.

"I'm not sure why," says Rav Zweig. "He surely saw more in me than I appreciated about myself. I guess he felt I was a normal, American-born kid, with an understanding of American culture, and it was nice in those days to see somebody of that background who was serious about learning."

Rav Zweig says he was astounded by how much time Rav Ruderman invested in him. "I became very close to him and he would talk to me a lot. Not about learning, or religion, but about worldly matters. I used to walk with him almost every Shabbos afternoon and he exposed me to a direction that molded my views on life, and my whole perspective of the Jewish People."

Rav Zweig shared one such story. A *talmid* was about to marry a girl who Rav

Ruderman felt was beneath his station — the Rosh Yeshiva felt that the girl came from a family that was lacking a sense of mission.

"I couldn't understand his objection, but 30 years later, I figured it out. For a man to reach his full potential, he needs a wife who will build him up. He told me a *Shitah Mekubetzes* that says a good wife is one who even if her husband is a thief, will help build him up. I don't know where he saw it — I should have asked — but I knew everything he said was so true."



THE BUILDER "If you really talk to a child, you'll figure him out." Although he's embarking on a massive expansion project, for Rav Zweig building *talmidim* will always be more important than erecting edifices



"Yiddishkeit to me has become, more than anything else, how to live. How to become a different person. Not only how to do the mitzvos but how to refine your character and form yourself from the Torah"

Behind Closed Doors One of Rav Zweig's contemporaries at Ner Israel, Rabbi Nachum Lansky — who, Rav Zweig says, is still the yeshiva's "resident genius" — once suggested they closet themselves away for a few weeks of nonstop learning. Rav Zweig readily agreed.

"We did this for five or six weeks in my dorm room, Room 206," he recalls. "Rabbi Lansky moved into the room. Other *bochurim* brought us food. Around 3 a.m.,

we'd go out for a walk around the block to get a little fresh air. If we got too tired, we'd sleep maybe four hours, and learn some more."

The pair didn't attend minyanim during those few weeks, and still, Rav Zweig says, Rav Weinberg encouraged them, unconventional as their project was.

"I think he thought the fact that we would be totally involved in learning would change us in a way that would give us a significant appreciation of what Torah is," says Rav Zweig. "And other *bochurim* would come in and talk to us in learning, so it was good for the yeshiva too."

The pair devoured two *masechtas* — *Gittin* and *Kiddushin* — and studied the Maharal. "It made a huge change in my life. I became a lot more serious about learning."

Interactions he experienced in Rav Ruderman's household also prepared him for marriage, says Rav Zweig. "With the Rosh Yeshiva and the Rebbetzin, you saw a certain *chavivus* [affection]. I grew up in a happy family, but seeing them was great training for me. It was enlightening to see not only how he learned Tosafos, but how he lived," something Rav Zweig says has tailored his approach to his own *talmidim*.

"Yiddishkeit to me has become, more than anything else, how to live. How to become a different person. Not only how to do the mitzvos but how to refine your character and form yourself from the Torah. It's not just about behavior; it's about developing character."



Rabbi Yisroel Moshe Janowski, principal of YES— the Yeshiva Elementary School supervises his young charges

There were two main lessons in character development that he absorbed from Rav Weinberg.

“One of his main points was that the goal of the Jew is not just ‘thou shalt not steal’ but how to develop yourself so that you shouldn’t want to steal.”

Rav Weinberg would also say to make sure you become the type of person that when you say *shalom aleichem* you really mean it. “It wasn’t just that he had a smile,” Rav Zweig recalls. “You actually felt that he was happy to see you. That’s what Rav Weinberg kept teaching — make sure the other fellow knows that you’re happy to see him. That’s your code as a Jew.”

Rav Zweig has applied those teachings to his own life. And when it comes to his own learning, not much has changed since his days in Room 206.

“Learning is supposed to be a transformative experience. The Rosh

Yeshivah is a *gaon* without question, but that’s not what I admire most, because that’s a gift,” says Rabbi Dovid Schoen, *rosh kollel* of the Choshen Mishpat Kollel under Rav Zweig’s auspices. “What I admire the most is how he prepares a *shiur* from scratch each time he teaches and doesn’t rehash. He still learns like a *bochur*.”

While still in Ner Israel, he married Rebbetzin Rifkah Zweig (née Lebovic) from Toronto. Her father, Mayer Lebovic, founded Ner Israel in Toronto. The Zweigs have raised seven children, six of whom live in Miami Beach.

“I’m happy to be a sounding board for his ideas,” says Rebbetzin Zweig, who says her husband will often discuss his upcoming *hashkafah shiur* with her. “A lot of times he will ask me if what he is saying is logical, or if this is the way most people think. Sometimes I’ll give him a woman’s feeling, my intuition.”

Our interviews fell during the week of Shabbos Lech Lecha, which focuses on Avraham and Sarah’s hospitality. Rebbetzin Zweig summed up a dilemma that many

homemakers face that her husband discussed in his weekly women’s *shiur*.

“Women are making the salads, setting up and cleaning up. How can they feel connected to Hashem? So he spoke about how Hashem’s kindness permeates the Torah from beginning to end, and by emulating Him and doing the same kindness, we’re doing our service. It was very powerful *chizuk* for the women because it makes them feel a lot better about having guests, and when they feel elevated, they’re happier.”

Anonymous Brothers One of the Zweigs’ sons, Rabbi Akiva Zweig, a teacher in the *beis medrash* and high school, noted how his father has always been able to juggle the yeshivah and his learning with the private time each family member needed while growing up. “He’ll start a conversation by saying, ‘I was thinking about this *kashe*,’ or ‘What do you think about this? Do you hear this? How would you answer?’”

Akiva’s brother, Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig, who serves as president of the Talmudic

University, says his father’s *chinuch* had one goal: to develop each one of the children as individuals. “My brother and I both went to Ner Israel. We had the same last name, and we grew up in the same house, but no one knew we were brothers,” he says. “It’s a *koach hanefesh* to understand who a person is and how to develop his potential. My father developed us to become who we are today.”

When he does mete out discipline or *mussar*, Rav Zweig does it with gentle guidance, says Rabbi Yaakov Burstyn, a *maggid shiur* and recruiter for the yeshivah, whose father was also a *talmid* of Rav Zweig.

“When I was a *bochur*, I was a good boy, but for a while, I was coming late for Shacharis,” says Rabbi Burstyn. “One day Rav Zweig said to me: ‘Except for your tardiness to Shacharis, you’re an excellent *bochur*.’ He built up my good points, and showed me that as a good boy, I could work on my weak spot.”

Rabbi Yeshaya Greenberg, *mashgiach ruchani* of the Talmudic University, has been a *talmid* of Rav Zweig for 44 years. The two learned together in Bais Hatalmud in Jerusalem, where Rav Zweig spent four years after his marriage.

I asked Rabbi Greenberg about his son, because in my waning days in Miami Beach, we were davening for the boy (now a grown man with a family) who was diagnosed with a serious ailment, and I lost track over the years.

Rabbi Greenberg talks about both the scare and the Rosh Yeshivah’s support. “The Rosh Yeshivah was with me in the hospital when we got the results,” recalls Rabbi Greenberg. “He helped me, in terms of how to look at things, what kind of attitude to aspire to, and what *takanos* to take on. He would say if you want to do something, see how you can help others. It’s fine to take on extra, personal commitments in Yiddishkeit, but the main thing is to figure out what other people’s needs are and how you can help them.”

To this day, even after celebrating his

“Each *talmid* needs something that will challenge him. The main thing I’m trying to do is to get *bochurim* to take responsibility for themselves, to grow in learning and *mentshlichkeit*”

40th anniversary in Miami Beach, Rav Zweig will tell you he still can’t put his finger on what actually drew him to South Florida.

As a newlywed, Rav Zweig learned in Jerusalem’s Bais Hatalmud under Rav Dov Schwarzman *ztz”l*, who tabbed him to be the *nosei v’nosein* in the *beis medrash*. When one of the *rebbeim* gave his notice, Rav Zweig filled the vacancy and became a *maggid shiur*.

As Divine Providence would have it, Rabbi Alexander Gross, founder of Miami Beach’s Hebrew Academy that bears his name, came to Bais Hatalmud on sabbatical. Rabbi Gross suggested to Rav Zweig that Miami Beach needed another yeshivah and that he might want to come start it.

“It didn’t really make any sense to move,” says Rav Zweig. “I was very happy in Eretz Yisrael and very *matzliach*. In my last year, I started giving a *chaburah* to the *kollel* every day.” However, at that time, Bais Hatalmud also had a number of students from Miami Beach, who impressed Rav Zweig. “I found them to be very intelligent, open-minded young men who I felt could be developed.”

In the long run, many of the *talmidim* Rav Zweig developed have assumed important positions in major American cities, including Rabbi Mordechai Shifman, who heads Emek Academy in Los Angeles; Rabbi Isaac Entin, head of the Torah Academy of Greater Philadelphia, Rabbi Meir Cohen, principal of Soille Hebrew Day School in San Diego, and congregational rabbis such as Rabbi Chaim Albert of the Young Israel of Aventura, Rabbi Chaim Goldberger

of Keneseth Israel Congregation in Minneapolis, and Rabbi Jonathan Rosenberg of Shaarey Zedek Congregation in Los Angeles.

But his main accomplishments have been reserved for his home base. Miami Beach is the largest among the many flourishing communities that has turned South Florida into the third-largest Jewish community in the US behind New York and Metro Los Angeles.

“I feel that Miami Beach is what it is because of the Rosh Yeshivah. He’s the visionary. He paints strokes with the broad brush, and has left me to attend to the details,” says Rabbi Yisroel Moshe Janowski, principal of YES — the Yeshiva Elementary School in Miami Beach, part of Rav Zweig’s yeshivah network. The school has 500 students, from preschool through Mechinah.

Growing Pains Those hundreds of students in the Yeshiva Elementary School now serve as the feeder for Rav Zweig’s institutions of higher learning. It’s running on cruise control now, but the early days called for a great deal of ambition and perseverance, says Abbey Berkowitz, a longtime supporter and current chairman of the board. The yeshivah’s official name is Yeshiva V’kollel Bais Moshe Chaim, named after Abbey’s father, Moshe Chaim *z”l*. The Berkowitz family were the pioneers of Miami Beach’s kosher hotel industry for many decades.

“When I was a young boy of 17 or 18, the Rosh Yeshivah would come over and stay sometimes until three in the morning planning strategy with my father,” Berkowitz recalls.

In recent years, the yeshivah’s most ambitious foray to grow the Torah community was its purchase of the aforementioned Howard Johnson building, and one that almost sunk them.

The yeshivah purchased the property for \$8 million, while the property market was still hot. Within a couple of years, the yeshivah received an offer to sell for \$30 million.

“I begged the Rosh Yeshivah to sell it,” says Berkowitz. “I told him if he did, he wouldn’t have to fundraise anymore. He told me, ‘I didn’t come to Miami Beach to be in the real estate business. I came here to build Torah. It’s inconsequential to me what this property is worth.’”

Sure enough, the housing bubble burst and property prices plunged. The bank filed a foreclosure lawsuit against the yeshivah. *B’chasdei Hashem*, the yeshivah found a buyer for a relatively small portion of the property, allowing them to repay a healthy portion of their mortgage and restructure the rest.

The future looks as bright as Miami sunshine. A few months ago the City of Miami Beach granted the yeshivah final approval for plans to construct a five-story addition above the dining hall. It will include a new *beis medrash* for both the yeshivah and for the high school, new classroom space, administrative offices, and an indoor gym.

For Rav Zweig though, building *bochurim* will always be more important than erecting edifices, and that’s where he prefers to invest.

“If you really talk to a child, you’ll figure him out. Until a child knows he has certain abilities, he can’t access them, and it’s



the responsibility of the *rebbei* to help the child figure this out. Maybe a boy doesn’t have a great memory. That’s who he is. But he may have very good judgment that enables him to be a *posek*.”

We live in a distracted generation and one of his goals is to help *talmidim* overcome distractions. However, Rav Zweig hasn’t found that the single-minded insulation approach is the most effective. “Just to say your kids are in school with kids without television isn’t enough,” says Rav Zweig, who recalls his days in Eretz Yisrael where even children from the most insular, *yeshivishe* homes always somehow seemed to know what was going on.

Since the nature of kids is to be as absorbent as sponges, the better solution is to keep them busy and motivated with advanced courses. But for those who may not be academically inclined, Rav Zweig suggests creating *mitzvah* or *chesed* projects. “Each *talmid* needs something that will challenge him,” says the Rosh Yeshivah. “The main thing I’m trying to do is to get *bochurim* to take

responsibility for themselves, to grow in learning and *mentshlichkeit*.”

He constantly encourages *yungeleit* to take on some teaching responsibilities to earn some money and gain experience, and instills in them avoidance of the concept of entitlement that has plagued the current generation. He’s also made his best effort at trying to rectify the most destructive force threatening the Jewish People: *sinas chinam*.

“I’ve never heard anybody admit to *sinas chinam*,” says Rav Zweig. “But if we don’t have *sinas chinam*, then why is Chazal saying that we’re still in *galus* for it? What does it mean?”

He gives an example. “Somebody insults me and I’m really upset. Six months go by and he still doesn’t apologize. But how many times in those six months did I go over that story in my head? Granted, what he did to me was wrong, but *sinas chinam* means that I took what he did to me and I built it into a thousand insults. Psychologically, we like doing that to ourselves because then we’re off the hook. So that’s the *pshat* of *sinas chinam*.”

The other side of the coin is *ahavas chinam*, and it’s far more profitable.

“If someone does you a favor, don’t just say thank you and forget about it,” says Rav Zweig. “Keep going over it in your mind and appreciate the person more and more. And pretty soon you’ve taken his favor and multiplied it, multiplied the appreciation.”

And his own *hakaras hatov* to the community, multiplied over and over again, creates a dynamic of mutual appreciation that keeps the positive energy flowing in both directions.

As we ready to part ways, while walking me outside and showing me the yeshivah grounds once more, Rav Zweig slips an arm around me and says: “Anytime you have some free time and want to come back and learn in the yeshivah here for a week, you’re more than welcome. We’ll set you up well.”

Coming from Rav Zweig, a fountain of sincerity, this suggestion makes me stop to consider it. It would make for a very different and challenging assignment, for sure. ●