

Emes Ve-Emunah

A Forum for Orthodox Jewish thought on Halacha, Hashkafa, and sociological issues of our time.

About Me

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Much of who I am is based on the philosophy of my primary mentor, Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik from whom I received my rabbinic ordination. It is also based on a search for spiritual Truth from various sources that I have studied. Primarily it is a reflection of my understanding of two great philosophic works, "Halachic Man" and "Lonely Man of Faith" by the pre-eminent Jewish philosopher and theologian, Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Of great significance to me is Dr. Norman Lamm's conceptualization and models of Torah U'Mada. Another individual who helped shape my thinking was Dr. Eliezer Berkovits who introduced me to the world of philosophic thought. My early religious education was most influenced by two pioneers of American Elementary Torah Chinuch, Rabbis Shmuel Kaufman and Yaakov Levi. The Yeshivos I attended were Yeshivas Telshe for early high school and more significantly, the Hebrew Theological College where for a period of ten years my Rebbeim included such great Rabbinic figures as Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, Rabbi Mordechai Rogov, and of course Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik.

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Ben Torah: Mycroft's comments are out of line. Someone was a contemporary of Rabbi Lamm's and he died in jail....

Tzvi Feifel: Beautiful, and I wholeheartedly agree. Thanks for sharing. Shabbat Shalom

Boruch: I would like to make the following point that has not been raised. How do we know how many people wo...

MD in NJ: Harry Beautiful and great post. Given the troubled state of health care in the country I ofte

joel rich: WADR I don't understand the complaints against meishiv, he is quite correct lshitato. Many of our d...

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2007

Morrie

Question: Who is the individual who is most responsible for the enormous amount of Torah learning by Baalei Batim that takes place in Chicago? Answer: Rabbi Morris I. Esformes.

Who is that? Morrie as he is known by his friends and acquaintances all over the world is a modern Orthodox businessman who is one of the wealthiest Jewish philanthropists in Chicago. How wealthy? I don't know. Is he the wealthiest? Again, I don't know. But if one travels around Chicago or around the world his name can be seen on the buildings of many Orthodox institutions as the sole or chief donor. Beneficiaries of his generosity include Lakewood, Telshe, HTC, Brisk, Lubavitch, and probably hundreds of institutions like that. He does not discriminate. And his name is always on top of every donor list.

I've known Morrie since high school in Skokie Yeshiva (HTC). He and I graduated together. He received Semicha from Rav Aaron Soloveichik two years ahead of me.

robert: Meishiv, I do not understand why you feel you needed to post your opinion. If HKB"H wanted Harry...

Dan: "It is byad hashem. Thats it. Nothing to do with hishtadlus, or bitachon." Nothing more need be s...

Dan: "Our Hishtadlus should be towards the goal of learning. Someone has an apptitude for something else?..."

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He comes from a modest background and is of Setardi heritage. He came to the Yeshiva for high school from Los Angeles and grew in his Torah learning. And he was also quite popular - with many friends. After high school he was one of the few in those days to go to Israel and learn in a Yeshiva. It was Kerem B'Yavneh. (Yes, you will see his name prominently on display there too.)

After he got married he went to work in the nursing home industry. Early in his career, he decided to into business for himself. He got up the capital to buy a nursing home, borrowing much of the investment capital from his parents, who were of modest means.

It was Divine providence. As he tells the story, he bought a home that was losing \$20,000 per month in empty beds. Just about that time, the State of Illinois decided to release all of its mental health patients because of a shortage of funds. Morrie filled the beds. Practically over night, that nursing home went from a \$20,000 per month loser to a \$20,000 per month winner. He took profits from there and built an empire of nursing homes. From there he diversified his investments into real estate and other ventures and the rest, as they say, is history.

I've lost touch with my friend over the last few years. His business, philanthropic, and personal ventures have taken him out of Chicago a great deal of the time. We used to spend many a winter vacation in Florida together. And we both served many years on the Arie Crown Hebrew Day School executive board together where he was one of the most successful presidents and generous donors that school ever had.

So why do I say he is responsible for all the Torah learning by Baalei Battim in Chicago? The answer can be found in the Chicago Community Kollel.

This Kollel may very well be the model for all Lakewood type community Kollelim to follow. Their in-reach program has been successful beyond its wildest dreams. They came to Chicago and took the Orthodox community by storm. By pure force of personality of the Roshei Kollel and the original Avreichim, Chicago came to love the Kollel. Orthodox Jews from virtually every segment and every neighborhood in greater Chicago came to learn in the Kollel, either with Chavrusos, or to hear weekly or daily Shiurim.

Daf Yomi, which already existed in Chicago with a very small number of participants, exploded after the Kollel started giving Daf Yomi Shiurim. This led to many others as more people wanted to participate. It seems that every new cycle breeds new Shiurim. There are now dozens that are well attended all over Chicago, from the Modern Orthodox Shuls to the



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Charedi Yeshivos. Some Shuls have multiple Shiurim throughout the day. I have been told by knowledgeable people who travel often to other cities for various reasons that, as a percentage of the whole - Chicago probably has more Baalei Battim learning than any other city including New York.

But the Kollel did not have an easy time getting established here. There was resistance from just about every Orthodox institution. It was felt by many lay and rabbinic leaders that it would be a strain on the fundraising abilities of the other institutions who already had a difficult time meeting their budgets. Telshe complained that Chicago didn't need a community Kollel as its doors were open to any Bal Habos that wished to learn. Indeed Telshe had Balei Battim learning there. (Of course it was miniscule compared to what is going on today.)

Morrie had heard about the succes that a Lakewood Community Kollel was having in Los Angeles. He decided that it was time for Chicago. Against much opposition he established the Kollel here. He committed to paying for their entire budget the first year out of his own pocket. Morrie also enlisted the help of Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky, Rav Shneur Kotler, and other Gedolim to help find the right Avreichim.

He insisted that the Roshei Kollel were to be of highest caliber and wanted the best Lakewood had to offer. Rabbis Dovid Zcuker and Moshe Francis filled the bill. Morrie also insited that the well paid Avreichim would be of the highest caliber - both in learning and in dealing with the community. He was not disappointed.

Many of the first Avreichim have gone on to become tremendous assets to the Chicago community and elsewhere filling jobs as Roshei Yeshiva, Shul Rabbanim, professionals, and Kiruv leaders. One of those early Avreichim was Rabbi Zev Cohen. He easily has the most popular Shul in the city. He has started a Choshen Mishpat Kollel of his own, and is perhaps the most charismatic Rav Chicago ever had. And he has 'chasidim' all over the world who call him for Psak Halacha and advice. The Chicago Eruv was built by him and a prominent modern Orthodox Rav. He was even invited to the White house by former President Bill Clinton, who had heard about him.

Morrie Esformes almost single handidly created a huge Makom Torah in Chicago... a Makom where Baalei Battim learn. He gets a chelek... a portion of every word of Torah learned that this Kollel has generated. I envy his Olam Haba.

What about the worries others had about competing for the same funds? Chicago has one of the most successful educational schools systems in the

country. Some schools actually are able to raise their entire budgets without overly straining parents tuitions bills. The wealth was here and it grew. And the desire to support increased. And it was Morrie who got the big philanthropy started. He set the example and 'taught' Chicago philanthropists how to give. And they did and still do.

I am a fan of this man. His personal struggles never impeded his resolve to build Torah in every corner of the world nor did it diminish his generosity. Not even by the prostate cancer which he has successfully conquered.

May he have continued success in all his endeavors. May he see much Nachas from his children. He has a Lichtige Gan Eden ahead of him. I think that is practically assured.

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