



In Conversation With

Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

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Please provide a bit of background information.

I was born and raised in Cleveland. I attended the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Afterwards I learned in Telshe Yeshiva there for 10 years, five as a *bachur* and another five in *kollel*. Eventually I received *Yoreh-Yoreh semichah* there.

Who was/is the biggest influence in the Rav's life?

The primary influences on me were, in this order, Harav Shlomo Mandel, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* at Yeshiva of Brooklyn, who was a *maggid shiur* in Telshe when I was in the yeshiva; *lhbc"l*, Harav Nosson Tzvi (Herschel) Baron, *zt"l*, who was a *Rosh Mesivta* at Hebrew Academy of Cleveland, and, *ybl"c*, Harav Shlomo Eisenberger, *shlita*, who served as *Rosh Yeshivah* at Telshe for 45 years.

Rav Mandel had great love for his *talmidim*. He took a personal interest in me — perhaps he saw some leadership potential in me. He really touched my soul.

Rav Baron was also very caring towards me. He was very instrumental in influencing me to go to yeshiva (my parents had plans for me to attend college). Due to his insistence I went to Telshe.

Rav Eisenberger was *maggid shiur* for the first-year *beis medrash talmidim* when I entered Telshe. My intention was to stay for only one year. He shared a *mashal* with me that changed those plans and my life:

A Yid enters a *sefarim* store to purchase a *siddur*. The

salesman shows him a *siddur*. The customer says he needs a bigger one — the biggest one in stock. A huge *siddur* is wheeled in on a cart; he approves and is ready to pay for it. The salesman asks him, “If you don’t mind my asking, why do you need such a large *siddur*?” He answers, “When my grandchildren visit me, they will take the *siddur* and rip out pages. With a small *siddur*, they will rip out all the pages. If I have a large *siddur*, I will be left with at least some pages, perhaps a *Krias Shema* or an *Amidah*.”

Rav Eisenberger looked at me and said, “Yossi, after you leave the yeshiva, the outside world will rip your *siddur* apart. You need to make sure your *siddur* has as many pages as possible so that your *ruchniyus* stays intact.” I could not argue with this life-changing lesson; one year turned into ten years and my destiny was charted for me.

I have shared this *mashal* many times over the years with those under my influence about the imperative to continuously immerse oneself in Torah and absorb its message.

When did you arrive in Toronto?

I came here in 1984. I taught at the Eitz Chaim Schools for 11 years. During that time, I served as the director of the Toronto Jewish Network, coordinating *chavrusa* programs in various shuls in town. I was the principal of the ORAH School for Jewish Children from the Soviet Union for 14 years. I assumed the post of *Mara d'Asra* in our shul in 2004. It is noteworthy that Aish HaTorah was



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very instrumental in enabling our growth.

How is your shul unique/special?

Ours is a very cosmopolitan *kehillah*, ranging from nonobservant to “black-hatters,” who all get along wonderfully with one another. Yet we share a number of common goals: 1) allowing everyone to grow at their own level and pace; 2) creating a *lashon hara*-free environment – while we offer lots of *ahavas chinam*; 3) creating an inspirational *tefillah* that includes much singing and zero tolerance for talking in shul; 3) emphasizing great “*kirvas Elokim li tov* (closeness to Hashem is what’s good for me)” as Dovid Hamelech says in *Tehillim*; 4) living with the ideals of *Chassidus*, although no one dresses Chassidish; 5) Striving to excel at whatever we do, at its proper time. For example, when it is time to *daven*, we strive to *daven* well, when it is time to learn, we strive to learn well, and when it is time to socialize, we strive to do that in the most proper way.

A great deal of learning takes place in shul, with programs for all levels, from beginners on up, in areas such as *Gemara*, *Halachah* and *parashas hashavua*. Over the years I have given *shiurim* in a vast array of *sefarim* – present and past topics include *Nesivos Shalom*, *Eish Kodesh*, *Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh*, and numerous other *sifrei machshavah* and *sifrei Chassidus*, and even light *Kabbalah* such as *sefer Tomer Devorah*. Learning takes place every night of the week and on Shabbos, including a *drashah* I deliver after the Shabbos morning *davening*. In any given *shiur* I also cite a broad range of reputable sources. How many places can you hear insights from the Baal HaTanya, Harav Chaim Volozhiner and Harav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in one *shiur*!

I have led shul trips to Eretz Yisrael.

Yet we are realistic about what people can handle. We facilitate our no-talking-in-shul policy with a very short *Kiddush* break between *Shacharis* and *leining*. For those with a very limited background who find it hard to *daven*, there are a few classes that are offered during that time.

We also have a *minyán* that is shorter and does not include singing, for those who prefer it. There is also a Sephardic *minyán*. That started after we befriended a community of Indian Jews – whose authenticity as Jews was investigated by Harav Moshe Lowy, Rav of the Agudas Yisrael of Toronto and one of the senior Rabbanim here – and who conduct their own Sephardic *minyán* according to their *mesorah* every Shabbos on our premises, led by Rabbi Mordechai

Sevy.

We have *chessed* projects such as one prior to the school year when we raise funds for school supplies for families who are struggling; that is a significant expense they have to deal with on top of tuition.

I wish to mention my wife, Rebbetzin Gail, who partners with me in all that I do, and whose classes and talks are very well received in shul and around the community.

Harav Moshe Lowy said to me that the reason our shul does not have

a greater number of members or amount of space is because of the abundant *kedushah* that exists in our shul!

Please elaborate on the goal you stated of living with the ideals of Chassidus.

During my yeshivah years I developed an interest in *Chassidische sefarim*. I share their teachings in my *shiurim* and *drashos*. That furthers the goal of living with the perspective of “*Kirvas Elokim li tov*,” which incidentally is found on the *aron hakodesh* in our shul. The *aron* in many shuls have a *passuk* such as “*Shevisi Hashem l’negdi samid*” and the like, but I know of no other shul that has that *passuk*. Achieving *dveikus* to Hashem is not easy; it is a lifelong pursuit. That is our model and I always emphasize these ideas.

Another way we internalize this message of *Chassidus* and *kirvas Elokim* is through singing, such as at our spirited *Kabbalas Shabbos*, during *Hallel*, *shalosh seudos*, *kumzitzes* and on other occasions.

What in your opinion is the most important trait a Rav should possess?

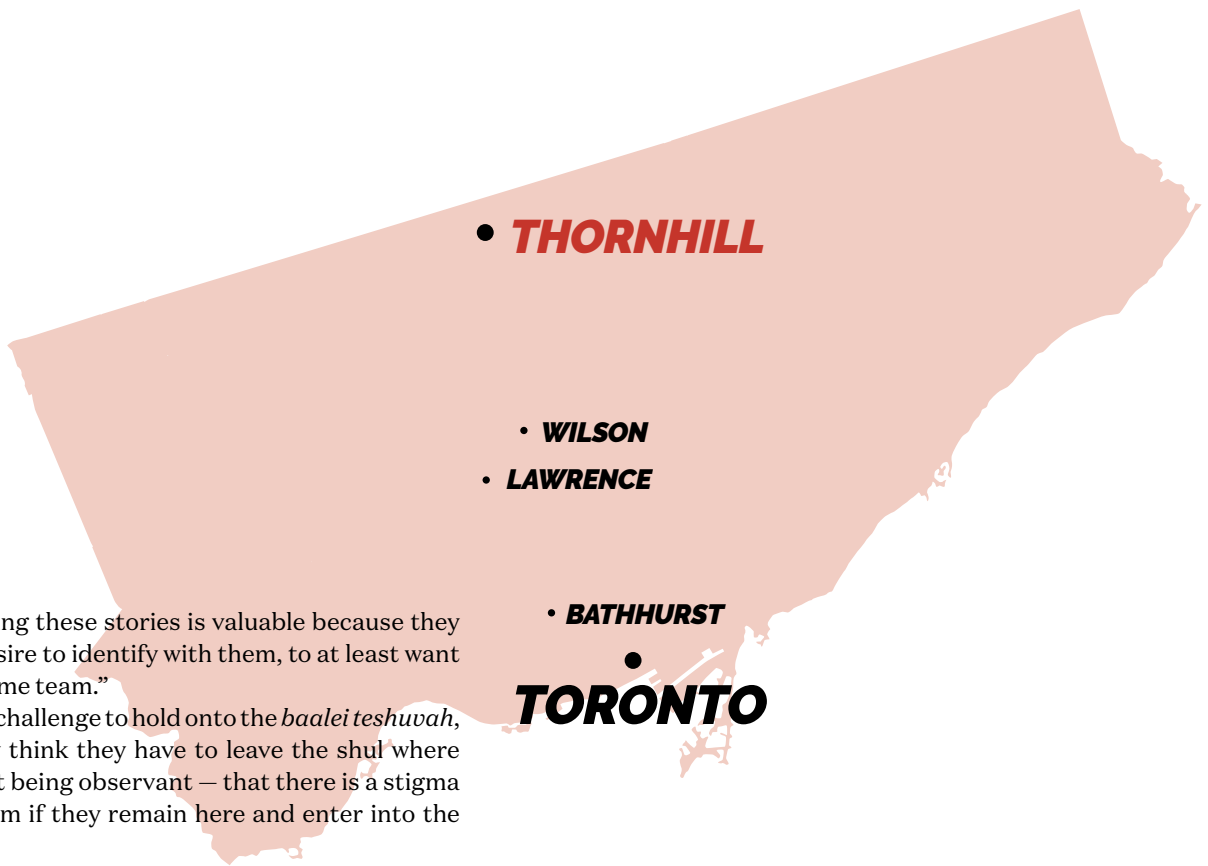
The Rav must be continuously seeking to grow himself, and it should be evident to his *kehillah*. He thereby serves as a role model for them.

What is the biggest challenge in running or leading a shul?

One challenge is trying to speak in a way that touches and inspires an entire, diverse *kehillah*.

A second is refraining from giving up on the minority of members who are not growing in their *Yiddishkeit*.

A third is constantly coming up with new initiatives and adapting to an ever-changing climate in the *kehillah*. My *mispallelim* know that I mean business, and we do maintain a high standard of *Yiddishkeit* here. Of course one has to temper the message according to the generation and the group one is working with. I speak a lot about *Gedolei Yisrael*, whose greatness is obviously much beyond our capabilities. Yet I tell



them that hearing these stories is valuable because they inspire us to desire to identify with them, to at least want to be “on the same team.”

Finally, it is a challenge to hold onto the *baalei teshuvah*, who mistakenly think they have to leave the shul where they started out being observant — that there is a stigma attached to them if they remain here and enter into the “mainstream.”

Can you elaborate a bit on that point?

Many *baalei teshuvah* somehow feel that when they move on to a shul that they deem is more mainstream, they “have arrived.” I tell them, “You never ‘arrive.’ You keep on growing. I myself have not ‘arrived’! One ‘arrives’ after 120 years! Unfortunately, some of the places to which they gravitate are not as *medakdek* in *mitzvos* or as inspiring as our shul, which unfortunately causes some who make the move to decline in their level of *Yiddishkeit*. Here, they never talked in shul and now they do because their new shul does not restrict it as ours does.

Any meaningful memories you can share about your years in harbotzas Torah?

I cannot point to any particular recollection. My wife and I live with the awareness and have tremendous *hakaras hatov* that Hashem has blessed our family that all our children have stayed *frum* and merited the best *shidduchim*. This, despite having lived among and worked with *baalei teshuvah* most of our lives, not as part of the “mainstream”! Numerous families whom we have brought closer to Torah have progressed in their *Yiddishkeit* and have transmitted the *mesorah* to their children, who have built admirable Torah homes.

Early in my career in *harbotzas Torah* I had absolutely no plans to become a Rav of a shul, but *hashgachah* willed it otherwise. It has been a very pleasant experience, one that has afforded my wife and me tremendous growth.

Thank you, Rabbi Michalowicz. We wish you much continued hatzlachah in your avodas hakodesh. ■

{ STATS OF **THORNHILL** (APPROXIMATE)

Shuls: **15**

Elementary Day Schools: **3**

Elementary Yeshivos **1**

Yeshivah High Schools **1**

Mikvaos **5**

Kosher supermarkets **2**

(The Bathhurst-Wilson-Lawrence corridor has additional shuls and *mosdos*)