

Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman *zt"l*

FATHER OF THE ZILBERMAN METHOD



Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman was the father of a unique educational method that bears his name and is quite popular. In honor of his twentieth *yahrtzeit*, I met with his son, Rav Yom Tov Zilberman, to learn about the origin of the method and about many of the other highlights of his life—including his success at turning some of the members of Tel Aviv's bohemian society into *baalei teshuvah*. Chief among them, of course, is Rav Uri Zohar.

BY TZVI YAAKOVSON

You have probably heard of the Zilberman method of *chinuch*, along with its offshoot, the “Zichru method.” The father of the Zilberman method was Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman. Today, there is a community of *talmidim* of Rav Zilberman in the Old City of Yerushalayim. There are also numerous *chadorim* throughout the country where the method is practiced. This week marks Rav Zilberman's twentieth *yahrtzeit*, which is a fitting time for a look at his life and accomplishments.

The Zilberman method, in a nutshell, is the system of learning propounded by the Vilna Gaon and the *Maharal*. And while his educational method is one of his claims to fame, many people have heard of Rav Zilberman for another reason as well: He was the

rebbe of the famed Rav Uri Zohar. It was Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman who influenced Uri to return to his Jewish roots, and Rav Uri Zohar still views Rav Zilberman as his spiritual guide. When he speaks about him—as he often does—Rav Uri's eyes sparkle with pleasure.

The Zichru and Zilberman methods are products of a great man's vision. Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman was born in Berlin and lost his mother at a young age. Together with his father and brothers, he moved to England and then resettled in Israel before the founding of the state. He was one of the earliest *talmidim* in Yeshivas Kol Torah and had a close relationship with Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. He later became one of the first *talmidim* in Yeshivas Mir after it took up residence in Yerushalayim, and he

became a favored *talmid* of its *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel.

When he came of age, Rav Zilberman married the daughter of Rav Yom Tov Zlotnick, in a *shidduch* arranged by the *Chazon Ish*. He settled in Shaare Chessed, near his father-in-law's home, and quickly became one of the most prominent residents of the neighborhood. He went on to open Talmud Torah Kaminetz, which quickly developed an excellent reputation, but when his recommendations regarding the *derech halimud* were not accepted there, he opened another school, Talmud Torah Hadar Tzion, which went on to become the largest *cheder* in Yerushalayim.

Rav Zilberman was profoundly humble. The general public became aware of him after a dreadful tragedy in the month of *Cheshvan* 5749/1988, when his daughter, Rachel Weiss, and her three sons—Nesanel, Refoel, and Ephraim—were murdered by terrorists. The family had been traveling on a bus from Teveria to Yerushalayim that was ambushed and set ablaze; Rachel and her children were trapped in the vehicle and burned to death. Rav Zilberman's *hesped* for his daughter and grandchildren was widely publicized. He moved to the Old City of Yerushalayim sometime after the incident.

Rav Zilberman passed away on 18 *Adar Rishon* 5761. At the *levayah*, he was eulogized by Rav Shmuel Auerbach, Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, and Rav Uri Zohar, among other prestigious *rabbonim*.

Rav Zilberman described himself as a *melamed*, an occupation that he pursued

for most of his life, although he earned his livelihood as a *sofer*. With regard to Torah learning, he espoused following the precise guidelines of *Chazal* in *Pirkei Avos*: A child should begin learning *Tanach* at the age of five, *Mishnah* at ten, and *Gemara* at fifteen. In the Zilberman *cheder*, the children begin learning *Tanach* in first grade and commit five *sedorim* of *mishnayos* to memory before their graduation. The sixth *sefer* of *mishnayos* is learned during their first year of *yeshiva ketana*.

Today, Rav Zilberman's method is employed in various Israeli *chadorim* and in schools in other countries as well, in locales as diverse as Lakewood, Montreal, and South Africa. Many schools have also adopted portions of the Zilberman system. The Zichru model, which integrates elements of the Zilberman method with some components of a more standard program, was developed by Rav Moshe Kletzkin, a *talmid* of Rav Zilberman.

“Today, my father's educational method is in high demand,” Rav Yitzchok Shlomo's son, Rav Yom Tov Zilberman, related. “Parents have seen its success; they have observed that the children who learn in these schools become highly knowledgeable, and they want the same for their own children.” Rav Yom Tov is the oldest son of Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman and was the first person to be educated under the Zilberman system.

“I was the first *talmid* in the Kaminetz elementary school when it opened on Rechov Yechezkel. The program in the school was



based on the *Maharal's* method,” Rav Yom Tov explained. His father subsequently left Kaminetz and brought his method to Hadar Tzion. “My father brought *rabbeim* to Kaminetz who would teach in accordance with his approach. They included Rav Yitzchok Dzimitrovski, Rav Zundel Kreuzer, and Rav Zalman Nechemiah Goldberg, along with other prominent names.” Rav Yom Tov revealed that he himself was the impetus for the development of the Zilberman method. “My father used to conduct painstaking, thorough research about everything he did, and the *mitzvah* of educating his children was no exception. He took nothing for granted, and he insisted on researching the proper way to perform that *mitzvah*. He consulted with the *gedolim*, and they advised him to bring back the glory days of Torah learning in the early years by reviving the guidelines taught to us by *Chazal*.”

The Natural Method

Rav Yom Tov offered an analogy to illustrate his father’s method. “When someone eats completely natural food, he feels good. He may not be able to enjoy the flavors of processed goodies, but he is filling his body with nourishing, healthy food. The same can be said of our style of learning. After all is said and done, we learn with great thoroughness and in accordance with the instructions of *Chazal*.”

“It is the ultimate source of pleasure. It might be more difficult, but only at the outset. For a *talmid* who practices this style of learning, it is highly enjoyable. It brings him pleasure, and it is good for his soul.

“Most of the parents who are interested in the Zilberman method are not motivated by the fact that they saw in *halacha* or the *Shulchan Aruch* that it is the correct approach,” he added. “It is simply that they want to give their children the best possible education. A couple from Har Nof once came to register their son in our school, and I asked them why they had chosen it. What made them decide to send their child all the way across Yerushalayim for his schooling? They replied, ‘We watched our neighbor’s son going to *cheder* every day with extraordinary pleasure, with his eyes shining with joy, and we decided that we wanted to send our son to the same school. This is the *cheder* that their son attends!’ The husband began explaining to his wife about the *Maharal's* system of learning, but she wasn’t even interested in hearing about it. From her perspective, the main consideration was the bliss that she observed in

the children who learn in this *cheder*.”

As far as you are concerned, that joy is a positive outgrowth of your method, but it wasn’t the initial purpose. The method wasn’t developed in order to cultivate joy in learning.

“That is correct,” he confirmed. “The goal was to design an educational system that would meet the requirements of *halacha*. The children feel fulfilled because they sense that they have mastered the material.”

You mentioned that the Zilberman method follows the Maharal. I had been under the impression that it was the Vilna Gaon’s method.

“The *Maharal* preceded the Gaon by about 200 years, and he vigorously protested the fact that children were not being taught in the manner prescribed by *Chazal*. The *Maharal* writes that he was alerted to this issue after learning *Shaar HaTorah* in the *Orchos Tzaddikim*. The *Shelah*, the *Chavos Yair*, and many other predecessors of the Vilna Gaon likewise protested the deviations from the traditional *derech halimud*. Nevertheless, it was the Vilna Gaon himself, the *rebbe* of all of *Klal Yisroel* over the past 200 years, who resurrected the style of learning taught by *Chazal*.”

What are the basic guidelines of this method?

“The children must learn all of *Tanach* first, followed by the entirety of the *Mishnah*, and then the entire *Shas*, with copious review.”

Would it be fair to say that your approach is at once extremely traditional and highly innovative?

Rav Yom Tov did not agree with that assessment. “It is the *mesorah* of *Chazal*. The *gedolim* have taught us for many generations that this is the proper way to acquire Torah knowledge.”

Did the Amoraim learn in this fashion?

“Yes. This method was practiced by the *Amoraim* and the *Tannaim*. It appears in the *Mishnah* in *Pirkei Avos*, where *Chazal* stipulate that a child should begin learning *Tanach* at the age of five, *Mishnah* at the age of ten, and *Gemara* at the age of fifteen. The *talmidim* learn in this order and review the material extensively until their knowledge is solid.”

Is that the essence of the Zilberman method?

“Yes. The purpose of the method is to fulfill the *mitzvah* of learning Torah precisely as it is described in *Shas* and *poskim*.”

GEMACH CHASDIE YOSEF LOWER YOUR CREDIT CARD RATES FROM 0-6%

Bring up your credit score
Save monthly on your budget
Get out of debt once and for all

1-917-426-8726
kimision@gmail.com



HEADLINES

Most Listened to Torah Program in the World
with
Dovid Lichtenstein

Listen to our leading Gedolim, Roshei Yeshivos, Rabbonim, and Experts

Pesach Hotels-
G-d sent, G-d forbid, or somewhere in between
The 8 halachik questions you should be asking
the Mashgiach before you sign up

Why wasn’t there an OU on any Pesach programs
the last few years?

How pesach in a hotel can enhance your Pesach..and
how it can destroy your Pesach.

Tune in to this week's show to hear!

CURRENT TOPICS

Midwinter Trips and Vacation?
Is it spoiling or bonding with our children?
Halachically, should Yeshivas be giving OFF?

Weekly Lottery for Riddle Winner

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

OVER 5 MILLION DOWNLOADS!
Over 300 Episodes

podcast.headlinesbook.com

732.806.8700

Listen on
Spotify

In practice, what does that mean?

“It means learning *Chumash* well and reviewing it, precisely as the *Chinuch* states. The children are taught the simple meaning of every *posuk*. The *Maharal* was the first person to try to remedy the situation that prevailed in his day, and he was followed by the *Shelah*, who was the *rebbe* of the entire Ashkenazic community. Perhaps you should quote him on this subject.”

I understand that the Zilberman schools do not have *bein hazemanim*.

“That is correct. Our *talmidim* learn every day of the year; there are no vacations.”

And you also believe that the children should learn *Mishnayos* instead of *Gemara*.

“No,” Rav Yom Tov corrected me. “We do not replace *Gemara* with *Mishnayos*. We simply follow the order dictated by *Pirkei Avos*.”

Wouldn't you say that the extra years of learning *Mishnayos* and *Tanach* come at the expense of learning *Gemara*?

“Not at all. As I said, we are simply following the order taught to us by *Chazal*.”

In which area of the Torah do the *talmidim* of the Zilberman *cheder* excel? In *Chumash*, *Navi*, *Mishnah*, or *Gemara*?

“They must excel in *Chumash* and *Mishnah*, because that is what they learn. *Gemara* comes at a later age.”

It is hard for me to believe that religious children in Israel today do not learn *Gemara* at all during their *cheder* years.

“That is the way it is done in our *cheder* in the Old City. In other *Talmudei Torah*, which follow the Zichru version of our method, the children begin learning *Gemara* earlier. Our system and the Zichru method both originated in the same place. Rav Moshe Kletzkin, who heads the Zichru network, learned under my father, and the idea for his system came from my father.”

I understand that the Zichru method is a modified version of your own approach. But doesn't that mean that it falls short of what you want to accomplish?

“The Zichru system is meant to deal with the issue of *yeshiva ketanah*,” Rav Yom Tov explained. “Many parents want to send their children to an excellent *yeshiva ketanah*, and they fear that the children's knowledge of *Gemara* will not be adequate at their interviews if they follow the Zilberman method.

It is only natural that a child who has spent most of his time learning *Chumash*, *Navi*, and *Mishnayos* will be unable to compete with a boy who has been learning *Gemara* for most of his years in *cheder*. The Zichru schools therefore follow the Zilberman method, albeit with a much heavier focus on *Gemara* in the seventh and eighth grades.”

What about the Zilberman *cheder* itself? How do your *talmidim* manage to get into *yeshiva ketanah*?

“We have our own *yeshiva ketanah*, and we have a *yeshiva gedolah* as well. Any *talmid* therefore has the opportunity to follow this method throughout his years of learning.”

A Sofer & an Educator

Rav Yom Tov Zilberman was sitting in a small room containing a bookcase filled with *seforim*, Standard Yerushalmi hats hung from hooks on the wall. In the background, I could hear the voices of children learning in the *cheder*. Rav Yom Tov practically lives and breathes the Zilberman method; he is completely devoted to his father's legacy. This is a trait that is shared by the entire family; Rav Yom Tov sang his brothers' praises while trying to downplay his own role in the family enterprise. Of course, he maintains that the method practiced in the Zilberman *cheder* and its sister schools in the Zichru network is ultimately the correct style of learning. “Go to the courtyard of the *Talmud Torah*, pick a child at random, and test him on *Tanach*,” he suggested. “You will be impressed with the results.”

Rav Uri Zohar tells me that when his nephew learned in the Zilberman *cheder*, he was able to sing the *trop* of any *posuk* in *Sefer Yeshayahu*, and the boy would be able to identify it, even if he did not pronounce the words.

“He is referring to Gad, the son of Rav Ika Yisraeli,” Rav Yom Tov confirmed.

What is the purpose of that skill?

“There is no purpose to that particular ability,” Rav Yom Tov replied. “It is simply the result of reviewing *Yeshayahu* to the point that the knowledge is soaked into the child's mind. *Chazarah* is at the heart of our learning method; we understand that knowledge is the product of extensive review.”

Why do the *talmidim* have to learn the *trop* at all?

“The *Gemara* states that the *trop* should be studied along with the *pesukim* themselves

(*Megillah* 3a). The same statement is made in the *Sefer Hachinuch* and in the introduction to the *Shulchan Aruch* written by the Vilna Gaon's children.”

Is it part of the *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah*?

“Of course. It is part of learning Torah. The *Gemara* also states in *Nedarim* that children should be taught the *trop*.”

The *trop* is the melody of the Torah.

“*Chumash* and *Novi* each have distinct melodies. This is the way they were learned throughout the generations. The notes of the *trop* are part of our *mesorah*.”

How did your father develop this approach? Where did he get all of his ideas?

“He used to examine and research everything. He never took anything for granted. He wasn't original; he simply remained faithful to all the sources. I remember that when I was a child, he spent a long time analyzing the first of the *Aseres Hadibros*, the *posuk* that states, ‘*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*.’ He was striving to understand if it conveyed an obligation, a *mitzvah*, or something else. He didn't merely observe *mitzvos*; he had to understand the reason and the basis of everything. We didn't merely ‘happen’ to be born Jewish, and we aren't meant to observe the *mitzvos* purely out of habit.”

Did he study all these things on his own, or did he consult with others?

“Both.”

Whom did he speak with?

“Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, for instance.”

Because they were neighbors?

“That was one reason, but it was mainly because he was Rav Shlomo Zalman's *talmid* in Kol Torah. After that, he would ask the *roshei yeshiva* in Mir. He always sought to develop connections with *gedolim*. He cultivated many relationships with the *gedolei Torah* who came to him to order *sifrei Torah*, *tefillin*, or *mezuzos*. You know, fifty years ago it was considered a lowly occupation to work as a *sofer*. It was like being a *shammash* in a *shul*; many people considered it beneath their dignity. But my father preferred to make a living through hard work rather than taking money for learning Torah.”

I have heard that he was very original in the area of *safrus* as well.

“That is correct. The truth is that my father could have had any rabbinic position that he wanted. Dr. Jung, the president of the Joint, was his second cousin, and he had

enormous clout in all the *yeshivos*. He once said to my father, ‘You want *parnossah*? Pick any job you want; you can even become a *dayan*.’ But my father didn't want to take him up on that.”

What would be wrong with making a living as a *dayan* or a *mechanech*? That would also be a form of *parnossah*!

“My father decided that integrity required him to work for a living. He considered it his duty to Hashem and to his fellow men. And as I said, he sparked a major upheaval in the world of *safrus*.”

Meeting Rav Uri Zohar

About fifty years ago, Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman was one of the first pioneers of the *kiruv* movement. Many subsequent *baalei teshuvah* followed a path blazed for them by the people who were influenced by Rav Zilberman to return to *Yiddishkeit*.

How did your father make the connection with those first *baalei teshuvah*?

Rav Yom Tov smiled. “It was purely *min haShomayim*. One of the earliest *baalei teshuvah*, at a time when the *teshuvah* movement was in its infancy, was Rav Yitzchok ‘Ika’ Yisraeli. In a stroke of *hashgochah pratit*, he rented an apartment from Rav Dovid Auerbach, the brother of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, on Rechov HaShalah in the neighborhood of Shaarei Chessed, near my father's home. Rav Dovid moved to Bayit Vegan, and Ika settled in the neighborhood. Naturally, many of his friends who were also ‘looking for answers’ began finding their way to his door. They once asked my father a question, and he responded with a cogent answer. This led to more exchanges, and they bombarded him with all the typical questions that a *chiloni* tends to ask without receiving answers: ‘Who says that Hashem exists? Who says that there is an *Olam Haba*?’ The only person who was able to answer them was my father, since he had already researched these questions for his own benefit, and he already had the answers completely laid out.”

How did he come in contact with Rav Uri Zohar?

“First, he came in contact with Rav Mordechai Arnon, who was considered a wonderkind in Tel Aviv, through Ika. My father spoke very forcefully to him, and he disappeared for a few months and then returned. He said that my father's words had pierced his heart and were giving him no rest.”



Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman with Rav Uri Zohar.



Rav Yom Tov Zilberman with his brother, Rav Eliyahu Zilberman.



Dancing at a *siyum* at the *cheder*.



At a *siyum* on *Chumash Bereishis* at the *cheder*.

Did your father speak very harshly to people?

"No, but he was relentless. He spoke about the truth and about the things it obligates us to do. It was very hard to resist him. He was a master debater and was very powerful in conversation. The fundamentals of *Yiddishkeit* were incredibly clear to him, and he felt compelled to enlighten others as well.

"After Ika Yisraeli's marriage," Rav Yom Tov continued, "a *sheva brachos* was organized for him in the home of Rav Aryeh Yitzchok, who was also a prominent *baal teshuvah*. There was a *minyan* of men there:

"The Gaon says that it is forbidden to let a hardship cause us to fall."

my father, Rabbi Avrohom Ravitz, and eight others from what was considered 'bohemian' society, including Shaike Ofir, Uri Zohar, and another famous person.

Are you referring to Chaim Topol, the actor who was attracted to *Yiddishkeit* but wasn't able to be consistent about it?

"No. It was Uri Zohar's brother-in-law, the famous singer."

Arik Einstein?

"Yes. At that *sheva brachos*, my father claimed that he could prove that the Torah is true, and therefore that we are bound to observe it even today. Uri Zohar argued with him vigorously. He was a very serious person even at the time, and he demanded, 'Do you know what it means to prove something? How can you say that you can prove that?' My father insisted that he could prove scientifically that the Torah is true, and Uri Zohar refused to believe him. 'Do you know anything about science?' he exclaimed. They argued at great length until Uri Zohar's wife interrupted them and asked, 'What is going on? Do you think you are the only two people here?' They continued the dialogue later in Yerushalayim."

Why did your father take a liking to Uri Zohar?

"He considered him an intelligent man and a man of truth. Uri found him very compelling, and the feeling was mutual. My father observed Uri Zohar's transformation; they used to learn together every night. Everything that Rav Uri Zohar has accomplished, including your own learning sessions with him, is a continuation of the work that my father began."

It sounds as if your father was very stern.

"Not at all. It was delightful to speak to him."

Was he capable of laughing?

"Yes, but he always remained completely composed. He was dedicated to every person and his heart was open to everyone, but everything he did was accompanied by absolute serenity."

Rav Yechezkel Abramsky's Ruling

Did your father change after the tragic deaths of his daughter and grandsons?

"No. He was deeply wounded and bereaved, but he said to me immediately after the incident, 'We cannot regress; we must keep moving forward. The Gaon says that it is forbidden to let a hardship cause us to fall.'"

Isn't it possible that he reconsidered some aspects of his life?

"He would never have thought that he was mistaken about his method of learning!"

True, but he might have begun to think that he wasn't obligated to change the world, and that he could confine himself to his own personal *avodah*.

"He tested himself constantly," Rav Yom Tov replied. "He would let anyone debate

with him, and he listened respectfully to every opinion and examined it to determine if it was correct. He would study every issue that arose as if it was the first time it had ever come up. When a *chiloni* person came to him, he would say, 'I am prepared to put my *yarmulke* on the table, and let's see which of us convinces the other. If you convince me, I will leave the *yarmulke* there. If I convince you, then you will begin wearing a *yarmulke*.'

"A certain reporter who wrote for a newspaper called *Chadashot* once entered into a lengthy debate with my father. They argued for three months, and the reporter finally conceded that my father was correct. He wrote a long article in which he admitted that the world has a Creator. He came to visit us during the *shiva* and wept bitterly. Before he left, he told us that the newspaper editors had assigned him to try to defeat the *rov* who had turned Uri Zohar into a *baal teshuvah*."

Which of the *gedolei Yisroel* encouraged him to implement his learning method in *Talmudei Torah*?

"When I reached the age of five, my father began studying the nature of his obligation to teach Torah to his son. He learned the *Gemara*, the *Shulchan Aruch*, and the *poskim*, and he concluded that a father is required to teach *Tanach* and *Mishnah* to his child. He decided to investigate what the *Talmudei Torah* were teaching, and he wasn't satisfied with what he found there. His next step was to consult his *rebbe*, Rav Yechezkel Abramsky, who was the *gadol hador* at the time. Rav Yechezkel



Rav Yom Tov Zilberman speaking at the Churva Shul.



Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky farhering boys at the *cheder*.



Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman.



Rav Chaim Kanievsky visiting the *cheder*.

said to him, ‘Do not send your son to *Talmud Torah*. Keep him home and teach him *Chumash*, *Novi*, *Mishnayos*, *Tosefta*, *Gemara*, and more and more *Gemara*.’ Rav Yechezkel even advised him to teach me *Tosefta* with the ‘*peirush hakatzar*,’ which was his own *peirush*. My father asked, ‘Is this optional, or is it a requirement?’ Rav Yechezkel replied, ‘You are required to do this. It is like the *mitzvah* of *matzah*.’ That was the *psak* he received, and he followed it.”

And that is how the Zilberman method was born.

“My father was irked when people referred to it as the Zilberman method,” Rav Yom Tov said. “He would reply, ‘This was the method of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the *Maharal*, the *Shelah*, the Vilna Gaon, *Chazal*, and

Moshe Rabbeinu. Did I invent something?’”

On the table before Rav Yom Tov Zilberman sat a file of letters from various *gedolei Yisroel* extolling the Zilberman method. In one of those letters, Rav Avrohom Pam, the *nosi* of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah of America, expressed his support for an initiative to open a *cheder* in Flatbush following the Zilberman approach: “I have been approached by a group of *yungerleit* who wish to establish a *Talmud Torah* in Flatbush emulating the many schools that have been established in Eretz Yisroel with the guidance of Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman, with the purpose of enabling the *talmidim* to master *Tanach* and *Mishnayos* with enormous clarity and extensive review. Since this is the proper way to acquire Torah knowledge, and



Students of the *cheder* at the Churvah Shul on Erev Purim.

it establishes the proper foundations in childhood, they will be able to achieve extensive knowledge of the Torah and depth of comprehension in later years.”

Another letter came from the *roshei yeshiva* of Beth Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, who supported the proposal of another group of parents to establish a Zichru *cheder* in Lakewood. A third missive, from Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, contained an enthusiastic response to another effort to open a school of this nature in Brooklyn. Rav Shmuel noted that his illustrious father, Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, founded a school in Monsey at the end of his life where this method was practiced, and that he asserted that the *talmidim* who were taught with the method were destined to become *halachic* authorities.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky was a proponent of the Zilberman method?

“Yes,” Rav Yom Tov replied. “I remember that he once visited Hadar Tzion, where our method is employed, and he was extremely impressed. Rav Chaim Kreiswirth often visited my father to confer with him, and he was also a major admirer of my father and his teaching method. He would often come to the *cheder* to test the children, and he expressed his confidence that *gedolei Torah* would emerge from this system.”

During the Hadar Tzion period, the Zilberman method (or its sister method, the Zichru system) received the approbations of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Chaim Zaitchik, and Rav Chaim Pinchos Scheinberg. The Steipler Gaon, Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, Rav Moshe Feinstein, and Rav Yosef Sholom Elyashiv also appended their signatures to a *haskamah*.

Positive Reinforcement Only

Aside from the unique curriculum of the Zilberman schools, what can you tell me about your approach to *chinuch* in general? How do you relate to the children?

“Our guiding principle, which has been absorbed in many other *chadarim* as well, is that since the world is sustained by the breath of *tinokos shel bais rabban*, every child is essentially a soldier on the front lines. His weapon is his learning: He learns *Bereishis* again and again, and then *Shemos*, and so forth. Every minute of learning *Chumash* is an enormous gain.”

What sort of infraction would lead you to expel a *talmid*?

“We only give the children positive incen-

tives,” Rav Yom Tov replied. “A principal of a *Talmud Torah* once asked me how we manage to avoid all the problems that plague so many other schools, and I replied that when the children enjoy their learning, it solves many problems. Imagine an entire class learning together in unison. What do you enjoy the most in *shul*? Isn’t it singing *Lecha Dodi* with the rest of the congregation? You can only imagine the scene in a typical *chasidish shul*. That is precisely what happens in our classrooms.”

But as a *mechanech*, you must have some red lines. What if a child lies or steals? What sort of consequences would he face?

“The Zilberman method doesn’t call for us to deal differently with that type of misbehavior. We have a *psak* from Rav Shmuel Salant that the line must be drawn when a child’s behavior is harmful to others. If a child is a damaging influence to other children, then that would be a reason to expel him.”

Another common scenario in schools is when a child arrives without food because his parents are poor and his kitchen is empty. What would you do in that situation?

“Take a peek into the next room,” Rav Yom Tov suggested to me. “You will see that there are chocolate sandwiches prepared for the children. But I am not sure if there are children who are actually starving today,” he added. “There was a period of time when that was a common scenario in Eitz Chaim. Today, however, when a child doesn’t bring lunch to *cheder*, it is typically because he didn’t want the sandwich that his mother prepared for him, and he ran out of his house without packing any food at all.”

You mean that there are no poor children here?

“There are, and we monitor them,” he replied. “In one case, we noticed that a particular child needed a certain medical treatment, and we notified his father. The father told us that he was aware of the need but that he simply couldn’t afford it. My brother Reb Yosef, who serves as the *menahel* of the *cheder*, raised funds for it.”

Rebbetzin Kanievsky used to relate that her grandfather, Rav Aryeh Levin, would stand at the window in Eitz Chaim and look to see which of the children were wearing torn shoes.

“I was a *talmid* there,” Rav Yom Tov said. “Rav Aryeh used to stand at the window and watch the children, and someone once asked if he was trying to catch them indulging in mischief. Rav Aryeh replied, ‘No, I am looking to see which children have no food.’”

“He Was a Man of Truth”

It is impossible to write about Rav Yitzchok Shlomo Zilberman without including a word from his *talmid*, Rav Uri Zohar. I commented to Rav Uri that *Chazal* tell us that it takes forty years for a person to understand his *rebbe*’s reasoning, and we have now reached the twentieth *yahrtzeit* of his own *rebbe*.

“Unbelievable! Twenty years!” Rav Uri exclaimed.

How would you define the essence of your *rebbe*?

“In a word, *emes*! He was a man of truth. Absolute truth was his guiding light. *Emes* dominated his home and continues to prevail in his community to this day.”

Did your children learn in the Zilberman schools?

“Yes, as did my grandchildren, as well as the children and grandchildren of my wife’s sister [that is, the family of Rav Ika Yisraeli, whose surprising return to *Yiddishkeit* was also perceived as a threat in secular Tel Aviv]. They knew the entire *Tanach*. I once told you that Gad, Rav Ika Yisraeli’s son, invited me to sing the *trop* of any *posuk* in *Sefer Yeshayahu* and assured me that he would be able to identify it. The Zilberman system is a magnificent network of *Talmudei Torah* and *yeshivos* managed by people with exceptional *yiras Shomayim*.”

I understand that you follow the rulings of the Vilna Gaon. Is that because of Rav Zilberman’s influence?

“I do not follow the Gaon’s rulings anymore,” Rav Uri reminded me. “I have told you about this in the past. I used to wash and recite a *brocha* before eating fruits or vegetables that had come in contact with liquids, as the Vilna Gaon rules, but then I was told that this wasn’t the standard practice. I asked Rav Elyashiv if I should cease that practice, and he replied, ‘I know what the *Mishnah Berurah* says, and he doesn’t say to do this.’ I left the room, and then it occurred to me that I might be required to do *teshuvah* for my previous practice. I returned to Rav Elyashiv and asked him that question, and he responded, ‘*Chas v’sholom*! The Gaon will be *makpid*!’”

At the time when Rav Uri first told me this story, he added, “It seemed to me as if Rav Elyashiv felt the Vilna Gaon’s presence, as if the Gaon was actually sitting at his side.”

It has been a long time since you visited America.

“That is true, and I hope to continue that way, until *Moshiach* arrives. That is, unless *Moshiach* himself tells me to travel overseas to raise funds for Lev L’Achim....”