



In Conversation With Rabbi Akiva Males

Rav, Young Israel of Memphis,
Memphis, Tennessee

Would you please provide a bit of background information?

I was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, where I attended the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland through elementary school. For high school, I went to the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study (W.I.T.S.) in Milwaukee – a branch of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim in Queens, NY – and I learned in their *beis medrash* for a year and a half post-high school. After Milwaukee, I attended Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim, first at its branch in Yerushalayim and afterward in Queens. After marriage I continued there in its *kollel*, ultimately receiving *semichah* from the yeshivah.

My first position as a shul Rabbi was in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. There I served as Rav of Keshet Israel Congregation from 2007-2016.

In the summer of 2016, my wife Layala and I relocated to Memphis, Tennessee. I am privileged to serve Young Israel of Memphis as its Rabbi and also to teach Torah at the Cooper Yeshiva High School for Boys, which is part of the Margolin Hebrew Academy-Finestone Yeshiva of the South.

Who has been the biggest influence in your life? Any recollections to share about these mentors?

I would initially mention my parents, Mr. Harold and Mrs. Faiga Males, *sheyichyu*. They worked very hard to put my siblings (I am the youngest of five children) and me through yeshivah and did everything they could to encourage us to be upstanding *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos*. They were, and continue to be, exceptional role models.

My siblings and I grew up *davening* at the Heights

Jewish Center, which was led by Rabbi Doniel Schur, z"l. He was a native of Chicago and one of the early *talmidim* of the Telshe Yeshivah in Cleveland. He was deeply passionate about Torah and *Klal Yisrael*, and we were fortunate to have had a very close relationship with him and his Rebbetzin, Shoshana, a"h.

I recall one particular Yom Kippur at the shul in the early 1980s. After the *shofar* sounded at the end of *Ne'ilah*, Rabbi Schur began to clap and lead the *mispallelim* in a spirited dance around the *bimah* singing "*L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim.*" He then noticed Ben, a young man who was battling cancer. Rabbi Schur went over to Ben, took his hands and energetically danced with him while the entire *tzibbur* watched. There was not a dry eye in the shul. Unfortunately, that was Ben's last *Yom Kippur*.

During my yeshivah years, from elementary school through *kollel*, I was fortunate to have had incredible *Rebbeim*, each of whom greatly inspired me and provided me and my friends with a wonderful *chinuch*. I arrived in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim (I believe it was after Chanukah of 5756/1995) during the final period that Harav Henoch Leibowitz, zt"l, was in his full strength and serving as *Rosh Yeshivah*. While I cannot claim to have been among the inner circle of *talmidim*, I was *zocheh* to attend his *blatt shiur* for three years and worked hard with older *talmidim* to understand his *shiurim* and *mussar shmuessen*. His enthusiasm for spreading Torah was infectious. Many *talmidim* including myself – who perhaps would have chosen different paths in life – were inspired by the *Rosh Yeshivah* to make *harbotzas haTorah* our life's calling.

What initiatives have you introduced to help the kehillah during COVID?

Like Jewish communities around the world, COVID-19 has been an extremely challenging time for us. Our shul is one that, *baruch Hashem*, takes *davening* seriously and it was tremendously painful to discontinue *minyanim* when that was necessary. When it was deemed safe to resume *davening* together, with the input of physicians in our *kehillah*, we enacted many COVID precautions. As the situation continues to develop, we have been making adjustments when necessary.

For a while, including the Yamim Tovim, we held a *minyan* outside in a huge tent in addition to the one in shul to ensure social distancing. Currently, we have multiple *minyanim* throughout the week and on Shabbos (some indoors and some outdoors). This has been quite complicated, as our shul is also in the middle of constructing a new building. Thankfully, crews have not been hampered in their work on the new shul, which we hope will be ready in time for Rosh Hashanah.

In this challenging time, one of our areas of focus has been on the shul's children. In normal times, our shul offers children's programming and groups on Shabbos; that is currently on hold and we miss those precious children so much! To try and compensate, a group of dedicated women has been putting together what we call "Shabbos Family Learning Kits," consisting of a learning packet with questions on the *parashas hashavua*, Torah trivia questions, puzzles and a Shabbos treat. These are delivered to people's homes on Thursday nights. After Shabbos, the children email their answers to the questions and are entered into a raffle to win prizes.

Another way we seek to remain connected during this period is through a "Kiddush in a Box," sponsored by shul members, and delivered before Shabbos about once every other month. Even though our *minyanim* resumed, in accordance with our safety protocols *kiddushim* are still not being held. Additionally, numerous members have not yet returned to shul because they need to be extra cautious in view of health or age issues. Because of that, they have been missing the cohesive social component of shul (as limited as it is in our era of social distancing) that is such an integral part of their lives. We try to fill that

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void to some extent with these *kiddush* packages. Another time, my wife baked a large batch of challah rolls which we placed in

bags with a sticker bearing a cheery message wishing the recipients a “good Shabbos.” We then delivered them to those who were homebound. We wanted to let them know that they were not forgotten. The feedback we received showed that many were very touched by this gesture.

Before COVID, we had an annual project to express *hakaras hatov* to our local police and fire departments. The children of our members would come to shul and bake a number of pies to be delivered on or around Thanksgiving Day, which was very meaningful for the on-duty police officers and firefighters. For this year's program, the kids did the baking in their homes, led by my Rebbetzin via Zoom. Then we all met up at shul and paraded in our cars past the firehouse, where the very appreciative firefighters stood outside wearing masks and waving to the kids. Each car pulled up and the occupants said “thank you” and handed the firefighters home-baked pies and cards. My wife and I then drove many more pies over to our local police station as well as the sheriff's department to express our shul's appreciation. This year's effort was especially important in view of the pressure that police departments had been under in the preceding months.

I wish to add that while Young Israel is an active shul with much to offer, we are not the only Torah organization enhancing *Yiddishkeit* in Memphis. *Baruch Hashem*, there are three other Orthodox shuls, the Torah MiTzion Kollel (which operates in conjunction with the Margolin Hebrew Academy-Feinstone Yeshiva of the South), as well as the Memphis Kollel. Each entity plays a unique role and does an important job promoting Torah and *mitzvos* while enhancing Jewish life in our community. We

• CLARKSVILLE

○ NASHVILLE

FRANKLIN

• MURFREESBORO

TENNESSEE

CHATTANOOGA •

JOHNSON CITY

• KNOXVILLE

STATS OF MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

Shuls: **4**

Day Schools: **1**

Boys' Yeshivah High School: **1**

Girls' High School: **1**

Mikva'os: **1**

Eruv: **Yes**

complement their work and vice versa.

You are a prolific author, having published many scholarly articles in various publications. Do you wish to elaborate on that?

Those efforts are inspired by my father, who has always been an avid reader as well as a skilled editor. As I was growing up, I observed his interest in investigating the world around him and trying to better understand subjects that interested him. When I would write something, I would show it to him and he would make suggestions regarding grammar and sentence structure and the like.

I started to submit articles to various Jewish publications during our years in Harrisburg. The articles are largely observations about experiences I have had and inspirational *Rebbeim* I was fortunate to know, or on topics that I found intriguing and decided to research.

What is the most rewarding aspect of being a Rav?

During the years I learned in yeshivah, Harav Henschel Leibowitz, *zt"l*, shared the following crucial lesson with us: Before his death, Dovid HaMelech charged his son Shlomo, who would be the next king, “*Anochi holech b’derech kol haaretz v’chazakta v’hayisa l’ish* — I am going the way of all the earth; be strong and be a man” (*Melachim I 2:2*). The *Rosh HaYeshivah* would cite the *Ralbag* on this *passuk* who explains that the sign of an *ish*, a man, is the willingness to seek guidance from others. Some people mistakenly feel, said Rav Henschel, that it is a sign of weakness to consult others. On the contrary, it is a sign of maturity to recognize when something is beyond the scope of one’s abilities and that he should turn to others to be *sho’el eitzah* — ask for advice. No one person has all the answers (especially one who is young). That lesson made a huge impression on me. Everyone — including a shul Rabbi — needs to turn to others for advice, guidance and direction as they go through life.

One of the most rewarding aspects I’ve found in being

a shul Rabbi is forging relationships with *Poskim* and senior Rabbanim. In my experience, they are more than willing to assist younger Rabbanim who turn to them for assistance. As a result, so much Torah and *halachah* is learned and meaningful relationships are built. As an example, during my years in Harrisburg, I often turned to Harav Gedaliah Dov Schwartz, *zt"l*, the *Av Beis Din* of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC), who was recently *niftar*. When presented with a *she’eilah*, Harav Schwartz not only responded with halachic guidance but also sensed the concerns linked to that question, and he was a tremendous source of wisdom and practical Rabbinic advice.

There are numerous *Poskim*, Rabbanim, and *talmidei chachamim* who have made themselves available when I have turned to them for their help. They have generously given of their time and energy to provide guidance regarding whatever I asked them about. The more a Rav works to develop these relationships, the more he is equipped to assist his community. I don’t know if I would have been able to have had those experiences and create some of those relationships were it not for the fact that I turned to them in my capacity as a shul Rav.

Another extremely rewarding aspect of being a shul Rav is the opportunity to do *chessed* and help other members of *Klal Yisrael* — in so many different ways. More than delivering a *shiur* or an effective *drashah*, to my mind, helping alleviate someone else’s burden is the most rewarding part of being a Rav.

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