





# Educator of Each Girl

FOR FIFTY-PLUS YEARS, RABBI MOSHE YANOFSKY WAS AT THE FOREFRONT OF CHINUCH FOR GIRLS. NOW HE IS READY TO TALK ABOUT HOW HE ENSURED NO STUDENT WENT UNNOTICED.

By Eliezer Brandt



caption

The idea to speak with Rabbi Yanofsky developed shortly after the passing of Rav Aharon Chodosh, *zt"l*. Having been tasked with writing about the Mir's late *mashgiach*, I set out to find people who were close to him. Someone in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin mentioned that one of the directors of the *yeshivah*, Reb Meir Leib Yanofsky, had had a close personal relationship with Rav Chodesh.

During my conversations with Meir Leib, he casually mentioned that his father was Rabbi Moshe Yanofsky, the long-time principal of Bais Yaakov of Boro Park, who served alongside Rav Boruch and Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan for over 20 years. Rabbi Yanofsky is also the founder of Machon Bais Yaakov, which he headed for more than two decades. Needless to say, I was eager to speak to him to learn about some of the most famous *mechanchim* in American history. I asked if he could put me in touch with his father, and he kindly agreed.

Rabbi Yanofsky's home is warm and wel-

coming. The walls of his home and other available spaces are filled with pictures of his children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as *rabbanim* and *gedolim*. Most striking is the picture of the Ribnitzer Rebbe, which hangs in a prominent place by the entrance.

Sitting in a recliner, Rabbi Yanofsky beckons for me to pull up a chair and sit down, but at a safe distance due to COVID. There are several pieces of medical equipment in the room as he has unfortunately been homebound for some time due to various ailments.

I begin by thanking him for his time, but he waves me off. "Oh, please! Thank you for coming!" he says with a wry grin. "Also, please don't call me 'Rabbi.' My whole life I've been known as Mr. Yanofsky."

Not wanting an honorific in front of his name is in keeping with what I have heard from his former students. Rabbi Yanofsky is known to be self-effacing and has always shied away from praise. He regularly advised his *talmidos* not to address him as "Rabbi."

"I can't bring myself to call a *mechanech* of over 50 years 'Mister,'" I tell him.

"If it makes you feel more relaxed..." he

---

**"Whenever the gedolim came to the hotel, Mr. Zucker appointed me their personal waiter."**

says, clearly uncomfortable, his voice trailing off in mid-sentence.

He begins by telling me what it was like growing up in Brownsville in Brooklyn.

“My parents were immigrants from Russia, and my younger sister and I were considered miracle children since my mother was in her forties when I was born. My parents never had a spare nickel. I never learned to ride a bike because my parents couldn’t afford one. My father worked for the same employer for 40 years and never asked for a raise. In those day, allowing a Jewish worker to take off on Shabbos wasn’t a given. Many *Yidden* were forced to choose between being able to put bread on the table and keeping Shabbos. My father was grateful to his boss, who never demanded that he work on Shabbos, so out of *hakaras hatov*, he didn’t feel right asking for a higher wage.

“When I was around 15 years old, I started working in Zucker’s Hotel in Glen Wild. I enjoyed it. Mr. Zucker, the owner, entrusted me with the keys to the refrigerator, which led to my having many interactions with *gedolei Yisrael*. Those encounters with Rav Aharon Kotler, Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Eliezer Silver were probably have been the most formative on my young, impressionable mind. Whenever one of them came to stay at the hotel, Mr. Zucker appointed me their personal waiter and trusted me to attend to their needs.

“Rav Moshe was a very warm, gracious and humble person. One time he came into the kitchen at 6 a.m. to make himself a cup of coffee. When I asked him why he was doing that himself when he could have just asked me, he said, ‘*Vos darfstu mich badinen*—why do you have to serve me?’ When I told him that it was my job, Rav Moshe understood. Later, when he came back for a second cup of coffee, I said, ‘Rosh Yeshivah, *es past nit*; it isn’t fitting for you to make your own coffee.’ Rav Moshe quickly replied, ‘Your job doesn’t require you to serve me more than once.’ Only after I told him that Mr. Zucker would be upset did he allow me to get him more coffee.”

Rabbi Yanofsky recounts this episode from his youth with a gleam in his eye. I ask him to share more about the *gedolim* he met. I am curious if they all ate the meals that were prepared in the hotel kitchen. Or did anyone bring their own food or dishes?

“I’d rather not portray anyone inaccurately or make any comparisons, so I prefer not to share those details,” he replies. “However, I can tell you an unbelievable story about Rav Eliezer Silver. One morning at 2:30 a.m., I had just closed the kitchen and found him sitting on the front porch learning. He was in his eighties at the time. When I asked him why he was still up, he replied with a bewildered look on his face, ‘*Ich zol gayn shlofen un nisht mekabel ponim zayn dem Rebbe*? What, I should go to sleep and not greet the Rebbe?’

“It turned out that the Skulener Rebbe was supposed to arrive that night. A short time later the Rebbe’s car pulled up, and Rav Silver welcomed him, asked if he was tired, held his arm and

## HALF PAGE VERT

{w} 3.75 X {h} 10.3



caption

walked him to his room. I remember that Rav Silver retired to his room at around 3:30 in the morning. When I came back at 6:00 a.m. to open the kitchen, I found him sitting and learning in the *beis midrash*.”

Rabbi Yanofsky recalls another incident involving Rav Shneur Kotler. “Rav Shneur and his family once came to the hotel for a Yom Tov. When he found out that I was supposed to wait on him and his family, he came over and wanted to give me a \$100 tip, which was a lot of money in those days. I refused to take it and said that I got paid for doing my job.

“After Yom Tov, when I noticed that Mr. Zucker had paid me too much, he told me, ‘Rav Shneur wanted you to have this without knowing it came from him.’ This might not seem like a big deal, but for a *rosh yeshivah* who has to deal with many other concerns, seeking out the owner and making sure that it looked like the money was part of my salary had a profound effect on me... Rav

Shneur wanted to do what he felt was right, without validation or recognition.”

\*\*\*

As Rabbi Yanofsky is reminiscing, I gently nudge the conversation toward his start in *chinuch*. “How did you go from being a waiter to becoming a principal?” I inquire.

“When I was around 18 years old, Mr. Yerachmiel Yitzchok Lasker, the principal of Chaim Berlin, knew that I was good at math and asked me to tutor a group of boys who were having a hard time with the Regents

[state exams]. *Baruch Hashem*, my efforts were very successful. Out of the 25 boys, 22 scored 85 or better, and the other three passed as well. Mr. Lasker was stunned at these results and asked their teacher to make sure that I had graded the tests properly. He saw that I had actually been too strict and that the boys’ marks were even higher.

“Mr. Lasker was so impressed that he offered me a job teaching a couple of classes. But since I was still in *beis midrash*, Rav Avigdor Miller, the *mashgiach* in Chaim

---

**“It made no difference who my students were. I always did my best, and the students appreciated it.”**

Berlin at the time, allowed me to accept it only if the classes were between *sedarim*.”

“Did Rav Hutner agree to a *talmid* in *yeshivah* teaching math?” I ask.

“Those were different times,” Rabbi Yanofsky says. “Nowadays, I doubt that any *rosh yeshivah* would permit such a thing. But back then, when a lot of boys were leaving *yeshivah* to study in college or take jobs in a non-*yeshivah* environment, the *rosh yeshivah* had to be more judicious. He allowed some boys to go to college; he forbade others to even apply. There was no general rule. He treated each *talmid* according to his strengths and weaknesses.”

“Why did you want to add an extra burden to your schedule? Rav Avigdor Miller didn’t let you teach during *seder*. That meant that aside from giving up *bein hasedarim*, you would also have to prepare during whatever spare time you had left. When I was a *bachur*, my nap time was precious to me.”

Rabbi Yanofsky sighs and says, “I was motivated, or maybe even traumatized, by the vision of my father sitting behind a steam press for 40 years and bringing home barely enough to survive. I wanted to make sure that I could provide more.

“My wife and I got married when I was 21,” he continues. “I started teaching one *seder* but kept two *sedarim* in *yeshivah*. Then, when our eldest son, Eliyahu Mordechai, was born, I needed additional income, so I took a job in Bais Yaakov.”

As everyone knows, teaching in a *yeshivah* or Bais Yaakov isn’t the most lucrative job, so I ask Rabbi Yanofsky about this choice.

“Of course there are better-paying jobs out there, but you have to be passionate about your work or you’re going to flame out fairly quickly. I loved teaching. I cared about every student I taught. Aside from Bais Yaakov, I also taught in public school. It made no difference who my students were. I always did my best, and the students appreciated it.

“I used to teach advanced calculus in Williamsburg in a *chasidische* girls’ school between 5 and 6 p.m. One time I was explaining a complicated subject and it came time to stop, but the girls were so entranced by what they were learning that they demanded I keep going.”

Not only did Rabbi Yanofsky teach in public school, but he also taught in Kingsborough Community College.

“*Baruch Hashem*, I was extremely successful teaching in secular institutions. Because of that, I was offered a high-level position at the Board of Ed. I was very honored, and it was an enticing offer. I wasn’t making a lot of money, and the job came with a large salary increase and many other perks. I was leaning toward accepting the proposal, but my wife objected vehemently and said that I should be working in *chinuch*—and she turned out to be right.”

Rabbi Yanofsky is clearly enjoying reliving the highlights of his teaching career, but I am more drawn to the details of how

HALF  
PAGE  
VERT

{w} 3.75 X {h} 10.3

he began in Bais Yaakov and carefully guide him back to that time.

“When I turned 25, Rav Boruch Kaplan asked me to be the English principal in Bais Yaakov, and I accepted. When issues arose that I was too young and inexperienced to deal with, I sought Rav Hutner’s advice.”

\*\*\*

I am from Switzerland and had never heard of Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan until I came to America. Fortunately, my roommate in *yeshivah* was her grandson. He was incredulous when he found out that I had never heard of her and used to tell me many stories about her. Now, sitting with someone who worked closely with Rebbetzin Kaplan for 20 years, I have the perfect opportunity to learn more about her educational approach.

“How would you describe Rebbetzin Kaplan to the uninitiated?” I ask.

“Most people have only two influential women in their lives, their mother and their wife,” he tells me. “I was *zocheh* not only to have my mother, *a”h*, and my wonderful wife, but I also had Rebbetzin Kaplan, who had a huge influence on me. I also had Rebbetzin Basya Bender [mother of Rav Yaakov Bender of Yeshiva Darchei Torah of Far Rockaway], Rebbetzin Chava Wachtfogel [wife of the illustrious *mashgiach* of Lakewood, Rav Nosson Wachtfogel, *zt”l*, and mother of Rav Elya Ber, *ybl”c*, *rosh yeshivah* of the Yeshiva of South Fallsburg]. All three women were powerhouses.

“Rebbetzin Bender was a gifted teacher, but her true legacy was teaching thousands of *kallahs* and training other women to teach the *halachos*. One time, Rav Boruch Kaplan, Rabbi Uri Hellman, Rebbetzin Bender and I went to Rav Moshe Bick. He was seated as



caption

we entered the room one by one, but when he spotted Rebbetzin Bender, he jumped up from his chair and proclaimed, ‘I cannot sit in the presence of the woman who is responsible for the purity of our future generations.’

“I’d like to share a story that illustrates how extraordinary Rebbetzin Kaplan was in the eyes of the *gedolim* of that generation. Rav Boruch Kaplan once had a matter that he wished to discuss with Rav Moshe Feinstein, and he asked me to come with him to Rav Moshe’s apartment. When we knocked on the door, Rebbetzin Feinstein wouldn’t let us in because Rav Moshe was taking a nap. But Rav Boruch was not to be deterred

and sent me to get Rebbetzin Kaplan. When Rebbetzin Feinstein saw that Rebbetzin Kaplan was at the door, she let us in.

“During the meeting, Rav Moshe asked his *rebbetzin* to bring some tea, and I offered to help. In the kitchen, I couldn’t help myself and asked Rebbetzin Feinstein why she had changed her mind when she saw Rebbetzin Kaplan. ‘*Du fregst gut azoy vi a yungerman*—you are asking a good question,’ she replied. She then told me that when Rebbetzin Kaplan—in those days she was still Vichna Eisen—came to Brisk to start a Bais Yaakov, the Brisker Rav gave her a lot of *kavod*. Later, when she was about to leave for America to

## BANNER

{w} 7.75 X {h} 2



caption

marry Boruch Kaplan, the Brisker Rav declared, ‘*Men ken ihr varechenen vi a man tzvishen menner, un ich mayn nisht kayn poshute menner*, she is like a man among men, and not ordinary men.’”

The Brisker Rav’s *haskamah* is very impressive. Eager to hear about Rebbetzin Kaplan’s educational methods, I ask, “What made her special as a *mechaneches*?”

Rabbi Yanofsky thinks for a moment and replies, “Rebbetzin Kaplan was an educator par excellence. If you are asking me if she had any specific rules other than that girls should be well educated, I would say no.”

I ask him to elaborate.

“When I first joined Bais Yaakov, there was a general attitude that all a girl had to know was how to run a household. A lot of families were struggling financially, and some parents felt that if they sent their girls to Bais Yaakov, their daughters wouldn’t have any employable skills. That’s why we focused on giving the girls an all-around education. Rebbetzin Kaplan focused on *limudei kodesh*, and I focused on the secular studies that would enhance the girls’ practical skills.

“Rebbetzin Kaplan was adamant about the importance of girls having a solid education in *limudei kodesh* and wouldn’t budge an inch. The Pupa Rav once summoned her, Rav Boruch and me to his home. He wanted Bais Yaakov to take over his girls’ school in Williamsburg. Even before Rebbetzin Kaplan could ask him a question, the Pupa Rav said, ‘*Ich bin maskim az men zol zay oislernen Rashi oichet*—I permit you to teach them

HALF  
PAGE  
VERT

{w} 3.75 X {h} 10.3





caption

[Chumash with] Rashi as well.

“Rebbetzin Kaplan responded, ‘Un vos iz mit mefarshim, and what about the commentaries?’ The Rebbe replied that he couldn’t agree to that, and Rebbetzin Kaplan rejected his plea to run his school. She was steadfast in her convictions.”

“Does that mean that once Rebbetzin Kaplan had made up her mind, you couldn’t convince her otherwise?”

“Quite the opposite,” Rabbi Yanofsky counters. “When you showed her a different angle, not only would she allow you to do something your way, she would graciously acknowledge that she was wrong.

“I’ll give you an example. In those days we had a very diverse student body, and many girls didn’t have a ‘normal’ Shabbos. My wife and I used to host *shalosh seudos* for people in the neighborhood. When I saw that they were well-received, it occurred to me that having a Shabbaton for our *talmidos* would be a positive experience. I told Rebbetzin Kaplan about my idea, explaining my reasoning, and thought she would agree.

“To my surprise, she felt that it would cause all kinds of problems. But I kept arguing, so she said that I was free to do it if

I felt so strongly about it. That first year I did everything myself, from raising money for food and transportation to finding a speaker. The Shabbaton was very successful but it was a colossal burden for me, so I chose not to do it the following year.

“Rebbetzin Kaplan wasn’t prepared for the uproar that ensued. She was inundated with complaints from students and pleas to have another one. The Rebbetzin, still not convinced of the merits of a sleepaway Shabbos, asked me to arrange another one. I told her that I would only do so if the entire school went, including all the *rebbetzins*, and she begrudgingly acquiesced.

“That Shabbaton was an even greater success. There’s a great picture of Rebbetzin Kaplan, Rebbetzin Wachtfogel and Rebbetzin Bender sitting near a wall clock in Camp Morris and talking at 2:30 in the morning. Shortly after that, Rebbetzin Kaplan said to me, ‘You were right about the Shabbaton, and it’s on your head from now on to ensure that it happens every single year.’

“Rebbetzin Kaplan was as devoted to her *talmidos* as she was to her 13 children. Each and every pupil was like her own child.

That’s something that all *mechanchim* can learn. Yes, it’s a job, but it has to be done with devotion and passion.”

Now that the subject of Shabbatons has come up, I mention the “urban legend” about Rabbi Yanofsky giving money to underprivileged girls so they wouldn’t be embarrassed by their clothing, and ask if it’s true.

“That was only for Shabbatons when the girls brought their own clothes,” he says modestly. The truth is that going away for a shabbaton is a scary thought for many girls. In school, everyone wears the same uniform, but on a Shabbaton, when girls wear their own clothes, it can cause teenagers from underprivileged backgrounds to feel anxious. Fortunately, for when the girls of Machon Bais Yaakov went away for Shabbos, there was no need to worry. Rabbi Yanofsky made sure that those girls whose parents were unable to buy them nice Shabbos outfits were given money to purchase them. This is only one of many examples of how Rabbi Yanofsky always championed the disadvantaged and less popular students. And it’s why his students remember him as a fatherly figure.

But Rabbi Yanofsky deflects the conversation away from him and continues on.

“Rebbetzin Kaplan was a true visionary. She had an uncanny ability to foresee issues that would come up and knew how to combat them. When she first suggested that we mandate a school uniform, I didn’t think it was a great idea. But she insisted, and it turned out she was right. Other schools that didn’t implement this policy started having problems. Some girls didn’t dress appropriately, and others wore expensive outfits and there was a struggle with jealousy. She was really ‘*ro’eh es hanolad*.’”

“What other *chinuch* challenges did you face in those early days?”

“Well, I originally brought in computers without obtaining permission from Rav Boruch Kaplan. He was furious and took me to the Voidislover Rav for a *din Torah*. After hearing our arguments, the Voidislover said, ‘Rav Boruch is right; you shouldn’t have done



caption

it without permission. I just wish that you had come to me before the year began. I would have told him that girls have to learn how to use a computer as it will be the only way to make a living. Come back next year, and I will *passen* in your favor.' That's what happened, and the next year computer literacy became part of the curriculum."

After leaving Bais Yaakov, Rabbi Yanofsky established Machon Bais Yaakov on 17th Avenue in Boro Park. "What was the goal of opening Machon Bais Yaakov? Were you trying to change the way girls were taught?" I ask.

"After I parted ways with Bais Yaakov, I really had no interest in working under someone else anymore. After so many years of teaching, I had an idea of how I wanted to run a school. The challenges we were facing in *chinuch* had evolved since my early days in Bais Yaakov. The vast majority of *frum* families were sending their children to a Bais Yaakov-style school. I wanted to shift

the focus away from the 'education is everything' philosophy.

"My feeling was, and still is, that a girl doesn't have to know the entire *Navi* to be a quality girl. The objective should be to produce well-educated, confident and happy *bnos Yisrael*. That's why our policy was to accept everyone who applied, regardless of background or academic level. Every Jewish girl has a right to a quality *frum*, warm Jewish education.

"These days everything is a competition. It starts with having to get your kids into

elite schools, the right camps and seminaries, and then finally *shidduchim*. All too often, the best interests of the child are ignored. Girls are under tremendous pressure not only to do well in school but to excel. What my staff and I tried to accomplish in Machon was to make all girls feel treasured. Of course we stressed education, but our *chinuch* went beyond that.

"We attempted to boost the girl's confidence and sense of worth by highlighting nonacademic talents and developing them further. Exposure to the internet only exac-

---

**"What we tried to accomplish in Machon was to make all girls feel treasured."**

erbrates this issue for girls. They try to emulate what they see, with the consequence that they develop low self-esteem, and that hinders their growth in all areas. In some cases it leads to anorexia or bulimia and a host of other issues. Our mission was to teach students that their self-worth doesn't depend on others. The girls got an excellent education and had a great time."

"At Bais Yaakov, you were among giants like Rebbetzin Kaplan, Rebbetzin Bender and Rebbetzin Wachtfogel. How did you make the transition to Machon?"

"To address that concern, I made sure to hire some of the most marvelous *mechanchim*. It was a privilege to work with them. These included Rabbi Yehuda Oelbaum, the late Rebbetzin Estelle Swerdlhoff, Rebbetzin Faigy Gringras, Rebbetzin Libby Mitnick, Rebbetzin Marcia Weinberg and Rebbetzin Faigy Wolpin. We also had Mrs. Bashi Cohen, Mrs. Esther Eisekovitz, Ms. Toby Einhorn, Ms. Rochel Licht, Mrs. Faigy Goldberg and many more. They added a unique flavor and enhanced the development of the school. Machon was something magical that the *talmidos* and their parents really appreciated."

When I was learning in Beis Medrash Govoha, I got to know Rabbi Yanofsky's eldest son, Rabbi Eliyahu Mordechai, ז"ל, a serious *talmid chacham* who produced numerous *sefarim*, founded the Lakewood Teachers Seminary (now called Lakewood Seminary Aliyas Eliyahu), and was responsible for making hundreds of *shidduchim*. Tragically, he passed away a few years ago at a very young age.

After my move to Brooklyn, I met his other children, Reb Meir Leib, a director in Yeshivas Chaim Berlin, and Reb Shimon, who was the assistant principal of its elementary division at the time and is now the *rosh mesivta* of Yeshiva Ateres Shmuel of Waterbury. I was recently introduced to another of Rabbi Yanofsky's sons, Noson, who is a professor at Brooklyn College and has written several bestselling books on science that have been translated into many languages.

Rabbi Yanofsky also has a daughter, Golda

Baila Feigenbaum, who is raising a *chashuve mishpachah* of nine children. In fact, Rabbi Yanofsky can't stop talking about his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"To what do you attribute your success in raising your children?" I inquire.

Rabbi Yanofsky gives me a radiant smile. "The main thing, of course, is the help of the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. And while it may sound like a cliché, *shalom bayis* can be a significant factor when there are struggles with children. *Baruch Hashem*, my wife and I have been happily married for 58 years, *ka"h*.

"When there is friction between a husband and wife, even if they judiciously avoid arguing in front of their children, they can still sense the tension [and it] causes them to act out. And of course, you have to be devoted to your children. Whenever an important decision comes up, ask yourself if your choice is in the child's best interest or your own."

Rabbi Yanofsky continued to care for his students even after they graduated, inquiring about their well-being and toiling to marry them off. The large yellow pad with their *shidduch* résumés that sat on his desk until recently is legendary. Graduates used to receive messages or emails from Rabbi Yanofsky reminding them about their friends who were still single and asking them to keep their classmates in mind. He couldn't bear the thought of one of his students not getting married.

One former pupil told me, "Mr. Yanofsky was more than a teacher and principal; he was a father figure. We would go to him with all of our concerns, and we weren't worried in the slightest that he would be judgmental."

I recently heard a story about Rabbi Yanofsky during his time in Machon Bais Yaakov that sums everything up. Apparently, there were many times when he went down to the lunchroom and stood next to the cook, helping to serve the girls their lunch. He didn't care whether it was dignified for a principal to ladle out soup along with the kitchen staff. What more can be said about a true educator whose students' happiness is his top priority? |

VERTICAL  
1/3

{w} 2.5 X {h} 10.3