



RABBI YITZCHOK LEIB KIRZNER, ZT"l

BRINGING US UP TO THE TORAH, PART II

BY TZIPPORA ZASLOW

Last week we gave a brief sketch of some of the details of the extraordinary life of Rabbi Yitzchok Leib Kirzner, zt"l, which was dedicated to drawing Yidden of all backgrounds closer to Hashem and His Torah. This week we touch upon several of the unique aspects of his teaching and glimpse some of the profound effects that he had on the lives of his *talmidim*.

THE DEPTH AND BREADTH OF HIS TEACHING

OPENING THE GATES OF THE SEFARIM

"He opened the gates of the *sefarim* for all of us ... he made everything so accessible. It never seemed like, oh, well, that's a closed book to you ... everything was an open book with Rabbi Kirzner ... To this day, I have yet to find someone who even touches the content that Rabbi Kirzner would give over in a *shiur*." This was the way one *talmidah* explained how it felt to learn with Rabbi Yitzchok Leib Kirzner, zt"l.

Rebbetzin Leah Kohn of the Jewish Renaissance Center in Manhattan described some aspects of Rabbi Kirzner's teaching. His specialty, she said, was "his breadth of knowledge, from many different sources." She pointed out that his most beloved source was the Ramchal, Harav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, zt"l. In fact, he named one of his children after him. He said that the Ramchal was his *rebbe*. Adds Rebbetzin Kohn, "The Ramchal is very profound; he deals with the basics in a very deep and systematic way. That was the way Rabbi Kirzner taught. He quoted him a lot.

"He was also very well versed in Chassidic sources.

Basically, anything that was profound and deep, he liked."

For just a few examples, he taught *Nefesh Hachaim* by Harav Chaim Volozhiner, and expounded on the ideas of the Gerrer Rebbe, the Sfas Emes, and the Shem MiShmuel, the Sochatchover Rebbe, *zecher tzaddikim livrachah*. Rabbi Kirzner named his son Shmuel after the latter.

Rebbetzin Kohn emphasized, "He was an expert in taking complex issues and making them crystal clear ... it was amazing."

Rabbi Kirzner would often explain the meaning of a *passuk* and then say, "What is this supposed to mean? What does this really mean?" And then he would go further into the explanation of the ideas, going into tremendous depth, until all the points were connected.

He taught simultaneously at several different levels. One of his *talmidos* noted that even when he was teaching those with very little background, "he would intersperse his *shiurim* with advice, signs and comments for those at a more advanced level of growth."

She recalled his advice regarding *teshuvah*: "'Review your goals in *ruchniyus* every five years and you should expect to change. Don't be afraid to totally remake yourself every five years.' He would say, 'This is for where you are now, but in a few years, you're not going to be there anymore.'"

Rebbetzin Kohn said, "He understood human psychology [and utilized this understanding] in a very beautiful way." For example, she recalled the way he started off one of his *shiurim* on suffering: "He started the topic by saying, 'The problem is, when we suffer, we feel like we were hit by G-d, abandoned, [as if G-d is saying to us], I don't like you.' The moment he presented it in this way, he opened up people to listen. He was amazing in understanding human psychology, and through his classes, through the

Rabbi Kirzner giving a *shiur*.

information he brought, he really made people see that Torah and the human being are really one, that it's G-dly because there is such an understanding of the human being that only the One Who created him can have. ... It opened up people to what he was teaching in a beautiful, beautiful way, which was also his strength when he spoke to people one on one."

Through the stories in the Torah, through the information in the Torah, he showed that all wisdom is in the Torah.

He took his job very seriously, often taking 8 to 10 hours to prepare a class. Rebbetzin Kohn said, "He came perfectly prepared – not only in terms of the material, but the way it was presented, the order, the structure. He really invested in what he did. He was very serious about his teaching. He

could easily have come into the class and just speak, but he didn't do that.

"He respected his students tremendously. He felt that if somebody comes to his class and gives an hour of his busy week, he has a responsibility to perform at his best. Each class was a masterpiece."

MAKING JUDAISM COME ALIVE

RELATIONSHIPS

Although Rabbi Kirzner taught many *baalei teshuvah*, the depth and breadth of his knowledge and his unique approach also appealed to those who had grown up *frum*. For example, there was a group of Rebbetzins in Boro Park who would go to his *shiurim* on a regular basis. The Novominsker Rebbetzin, *a"h*, was an



avid student of Rabbi Kirzner. Rebbetzin Feige Twerski said, "He not only gave over the *guf* of Torah, he got into the *neshamah* of Torah."

Many *talmidim* found that his *shiurim* made Judaism come alive for them. One *talmid* said that when he first heard Rabbi Kirzner giving a *shiur*, he was awe-struck. Rabbi Kirzner was "talking about a relationship with G-d." He said, "I wasn't used to hearing this kind of thing, even though I grew up *frum*." From his perspective, "Rabbi Kirzner dealt with the emotions of Judaism."

Lisa Aiken, Ph.D, became one of his students by listening to his taped lectures. She later worked with him in writing a book called *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, based on his *shiurim* on *tefillah*. Aiken noted, "His big thing was

and every week he repeated the entire *shiur* for her."

According to his wife, Rabbi Kirzner nurtured his own relationships, too. Rebbetzin Kirzner commented, "When you care about someone, you understand them." Their third child, Dovid, was thirteen in 1992 when his father was *niftar*. He recalled his father's great sensitivity and kindness. "When I would have problems with friends or *rebbeim* or whatever, he was always able to tell when something was bothering me," even the slightest change in mood. "He intuitively knew something was wrong," and he was "very, very understanding and caring."

Efraim Kirzner, the oldest son, who was seventeen when his father was *niftar*, said that the way his father

point. "It must have taken a superhuman strength to blow shofar," Rebbetzin Kirzner commented. She "couldn't imagine how he could do it; the full [number] of blasts... He didn't even have the *koach* to talk at that point."

Rebbetzin Kirzner believes that the essence of her husband's teaching was that "a person should try his hardest to live his life with a relationship with Hashem ... to strive to come as close to Hashem as possible in everything he does ... *Yiddishkeit* is not a burden; it's sweet."

Efraim Kirzner said that his father had an "inner happiness, a calmness ... he led by example ... He was very serene in the way he conducted himself ... because he was in love with Hashem ... He felt he was with Hashem."

Rabbi Kirzner often emphasized in his teaching that the performance of *mitzvos* is, in fact, the way to develop a love for Hashem and a relationship with Him. Efraim Kirzner said his father was "so emotional about *mitzvos*." At the Seder, "he was crying at *Nishmas* ... thanking Hashem for everything." His son Dovid said that he "aspires to live [as his father] lived ... knowing that everything has a deeper meaning ... that *mitzvos* aren't just actions."

COUNSELOR AND SPIRITUAL GUIDE

Rabbi Kirzner was extremely dedicated to his *talmidim*. "He would speak to them one on one for many hours, guiding them," Rebbetzin Kohn recalls. Many people have said that they'll never again have a guide and teacher like Rabbi Kirzner.

One *talmidah* reflected on the loss of his guidance: "To this very day, when I'm faced with some kind of a crisis or a deep disappointment or a dilemma ... when I think of whom I would like to speak to about this, it would be Rabbi Kirzner. I can't tell you how many times that thought crosses my mind ... Where can I go with this?"

The essence of his teaching was that "a person should try his hardest to live his life with a relationship with Hashem ... to strive to come as close to Hashem as possible in everything he does."

relationships." She described her first encounter with Rabbi Kirzner, via his taped *shiurim*, when she was 25 years old. "I was just astounded by the way he spoke..." He was talking about "putting G-d in the center of your life"; he taught that life was about having a relationship with G-d, how people can develop the skills to be close to G-d and people."

He was very concerned about how people related to each other. One can see this in *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, where, after each explanation of a *brachah* in *Shemoneh Esrei*, there is a section on implications for human relationships.

Lisa Aiken recalled the way he related to others: "He was incredibly humble, an *anav*. He could teach to a very small class or to hundreds of people; everybody was precious to him. He taught for a while in Lynnbrook, Long Island, to a very small group. One woman was unable to attend his class,

treated his mother made a big impression on him. "He was always very patient and understanding. He respected her. He did whatever he could to help her, always being there for her."

A REAL CONNECTION

Rebbetzin Kirzner recalled the days of their engagement, during Elul, when Rabbi Kirzner said he was looking forward to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur so much. She said that she "had never heard of that before. As a kid, you look forward to Pesach, Sukkos — those were the fun *Yamim Tovim* — not Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur! It was such an eye-opener; he was so connected. It all fits in; if a person cherishes his relationship with Hashem, those are his favorite days."

The Rosh Hashanah before he was *niftar*, in Mexico, he blew shofar for himself even though he was so sick; his lungs were severely damaged at that

One of his *talmidos* described her relationship with Rabbi Kirzner this way: "I felt like I had someone to guide me in a Torah way – I had someone who was going to help me grow spiritually ... he would suggest what to learn ... to do... When he passed away, I felt that there would never again be a rabbi to work with me in that way. I was right." At one point when she was going out of the country, he gave her about 100 of his Torah tapes to help fortify her.

His presence is very strong even on the tapes. At least one woman became *shomer Shabbos* as a result of listening to Rabbi Kirzner's tapes while driving to and from work on the Los Angeles freeway.

THE SIGN OF A GADOL

One man who was raised *frum* said, "I had a problem that I didn't know how to handle. I had gone to other people and received answers such as 'It's a test. It's a blessing in disguise. You'll grow from it. It's a *kapparah*.' When I went to [Rabbi Kirzner], I felt as if he was in the problem with me. I felt as if he lifted the problem off my shoulders and took it upon his. He told me to go speak with someone and to get back to him and let him know what the other person said.

"I went [immediately] to the other person. After speaking with him, I went to work. I was going to call [Rabbi Kirzner] as soon as I got to work, but I didn't have any privacy. I waited until

the next day to call. As soon as I said, 'Hello, Rabbi Kirzner,' he cried out, 'Why didn't you call me?' My first reaction was 'What are you yelling at me for?' But I quickly realized that he was so involved with the problem, it was as if it was his problem. He had been thinking about it from the moment that I left him. I told this story to a Rav, who stated, 'That is the sign of a *Gadol*.'"

1. With his son Moshe Chaim, who was named after Harav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *zt"l*. **2.** With his five eldest sons. **3.** With Moshe Chaim on the day of his *upsheren*. **4.** *Bentching lulav* with his son Aharon in Lakewood. **5.** His son Binyamin's *upsheren*.



VIEWING SUFFERING IN THE PROPER WAY

During most of the time that Rabbi Kirzner was teaching and counseling his students in New York and Edison, N.J., he was very sick. Other than close family members, most people didn't know he was ill, except Rabbi and Rebbetzin Kohn and a few others. Nobody could believe it later, according to Rebbetzin Kohn, because he went ahead with his work as before.

"Right away he knew how sick he was. The doctors told him at what stage his sickness was; he knew all along that he needed a miracle in order to survive, but he still went ahead, taught, had a sense of humor. He missed classes only when he had a treatment, and many times he would go straight from a treatment to give a class."

While he was sick, he gave a series of classes at the Jewish Renaissance Center on suffering. (The book *Making Sense of Suffering*, compiled by Jeremy Kagan and Yonason Rosenblum, is based on this series of *shiurim*.) Rebbetzin Kohn said, "Nobody in the crowd who was in his classes realized that he was struggling with the issue himself and working it through. It was an amazing series of classes based on his dealing with the issue. But he was so positive in his approach; it was so internalized that nobody in the crowd knew he was speaking from his own experience. There was no trace of it in his mood and his way of teaching."

Rabbi Kirzner once gave a class after he had just come straight from the doctor. Just before the class was to begin, he told Rebbetzin Kohn the results of a biopsy. It was very bad news. "He went to the podium and spoke about suffering in such a way" that she was overwhelmed. "He hadn't even been home yet or spoken to anyone close to him," she said. He was a "hero." He was so strong that she refers to Rabbi Kirzner, whose name was Yitzchok Leib, as a "lion."

Rabbi Kirzner said in his taped *shiur* "Living and Growing with Suffering,"



"The Jewish mentality is, I'm here as an emissary of G-d ... and therefore, if all of a sudden at a certain juncture in my life, I go through suffering or tragedy or

"If this is what You're sending to Your emissary, You obviously feel that it is necessary for Your emissary to go through this in order to fulfill his mission in life."

crisis, I turn to my Master and I say to my Master, 'I don't know what You're doing, but obviously, if this is what You're sending to Your emissary, You obviously feel that it is necessary for Your emissary to go through this in order to fulfill his mission in life.'"

He spoke about the way people who are suffering sometimes do an "about-face" from G-d because they are hurting and they are angry. He shared his deep *emunah* and *bitachon* in Hashem with his *talmidim*, encouraging them not to turn away if they are suffering: "If you've got questions and if you have struggles ... say those struggles and say those things that are painful to G-d ... share the pain with G-d. Will we get answers? Sometimes yes; sometimes it baffles us

At the Jewish Renaissance Center in N.Y.

PHOTO CREDIT: ROSLYN DICKENS

for many, many years ... but at least we're confronting it in a way that there's a possibility that with time I will be able to grow from my suffering, because I'm engaging G-d in my pain. And if I engage G-d in my pain, at that moment when I really want to invite G-d into my life and to be my companion in my pain, then G-d will enter my life and help me become reconciled to the pain — sometimes with reasons and maybe even without reasons, but at least to be able to deal with it and not to become dysfunctionally immobilized by it."

A COMMON STRUGGLE

One of Rabbi Kirzner's secrets to success in drawing people closer to *Yiddishkeit* was his tremendous respect for every Jew. He had an ability to relate to others as equals, regardless of their background. One of his *talmidim*, who

became a very close friend, said that he was "accepting of people, with all their failings. When he talked to a group of secular people, there was a very open atmosphere; he was able to handle it. He wasn't threatened by anyone's appearance."

One *talmid* explained, "He appealed to everybody. It was such a wide variety [of people in the *shiur*] that I saw someone with a hat and a beard sitting next to someone with no yarmulke. They both listened to the same *shiur*. After going to his *shiurim* people would all say the same thing: 'He was talking to me.'"

People could take what he taught and immediately apply it to their own life struggles. A *talmidah* recalled a *shiur* at Bnei Zion on the East Side of Manhattan.

She described the experience of her cousin, who had “no Jewish connection at all,” whom she had brought to one of Rabbi Kirzner’s classes. Her cousin had just lost her husband at a very young age and was “shell-shocked.” The things he said “resonated with her in that lecture [to such an extent] that she quotes him to this day ... He didn’t know what she was going through at the time. He didn’t even know her; the things he said were not aimed at her specifically, but they were so profound that they really helped her through that crisis and at various times in her life. And that’s a person with no [Jewish

education].”

He had an “uncanny ability to make everything relevant to our everyday lives,” Rebbetzin Feige Twerski said. “He didn’t posture; he was real. He was always right there where we were ... not judgmental; he didn’t just give the party line... He understood the human struggle in a way very few people could. He had no pretenses. He resonated with people; he cared ... a total, complete, exquisite caring.”

One *baalas teshuvah* described Rabbi Kirzner’s openness to people. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised, but you have a preconceived notion that people who are so evolved, so accomplished, so knowledgeable, so deep, so religious ... it’s not that they’re going to look down upon you, but they just don’t relate to you; they’re something [apart]. They’re trying to help you and their heart is in

that, but they don’t really understand you. There was always a sense that you could say anything to him; you could ask him anything... He was from the world. He understood the world, even the parts of it that he did not participate in.”

His students felt truly cared for by him. They felt respected, they felt welcome, they felt like he took a personal interest in them and derived much *nachas* from them.

“Rabbi Kirzner could admit that the other person isn’t so different from himself,” Rebbetzin Twerski explained. It was a common struggle, “but people are in a different place on the spectrum — that’s how he viewed people. He understood a person’s potential; he motivated people through understanding and caring, not preaching... He had the key how to motivate people to grow — he understood the grand potential in each person.”

Another *talmidah* said that she learned from Rabbi Kirzner “the importance of believing in people.”

In Rabbi Kirzner’s classes, all the categories, divisions, and barriers among Jews disappeared. All Yidden were together as one. He brought all his students up to the Torah in levels of *kedushah*. Like the Jewish people coming together at Har Sinai with one heart and one mind, they all gathered to receive the Torah, to be *mekabel* Torah at their own level.

One *talmidah* said, “In class, we were all pulled together; he brought out the soul in all of us... It was a feeling of peace and a taste of Moshiach.” **M**

Author’s note: It is a great example of Rabbi Kirzner’s *chessed* that he recorded his *shiurim* so that we can still benefit from his teachings. He covered many subjects in his *shiurim*. In addition to *tefillah*, *Tehillim*, *Chumash*, *Navi*, Jewish thought, and holidays, he covered topics such as character development and relationship development. One of his most popular series was entitled: “Why the Innocent Suffer?” To receive a catalog and to order tapes, call C. Singer at (718) 436-2652.

(Top) With a *talmid*.

(Bottom) A *melaveh malkah* in the Kirzner home shortly before Rabbi Kirzner was *niftar*. He is seated at the head of the table.

