

# RABBI YITZCHOK LEIB KIRZNER, ZT”L

## BRINGING US UP TO THE TORAH, PART I



BY TZIPPORA ZASLOW

Rabbi Yitzchok Leib Kirzner, zt”l, was a unique and dynamic figure in *kiruv* work, Jewish outreach, during the 1980s and early 1990s. A Jew from any background could attend his *shiurim* and emerge with deep new Torah insights and soaring inspiration in *Yiddishkeit*; a Vizhnitzer chassid from Meah Shearim, a recent *baalas teshuvah*, a Jew with no Jewish background at all, or a Boro Park rebbetzin — all would attend the same *shiur* and be transformed.

Rabbi Kirzner knew how to reach the heart of every Jew — the heart that seeks a connection with Hashem. In a *shiur* on *Tehillim* 39, explaining the power of Dovid Hamelech’s *Tehillim*, Rabbi Kirzner said, “[Dovid Hamelech] was taken out of the group of *Klal Yisrael* and became a model of what the *lev*, the heart, of every Jew, is ... and therefore, the things that [Dovid Hamelech] worked out ... are representative of the music of the heart of the *neshamah* of *Klal Yisrael*. ... After all is said and done, the deepest desire of the Yid is ‘*tochalti lecha hi*, my hope is to be with You’” (*Tehillim* 39:8).

### A LINK IN THE CHAIN

One *talmidah* described her impression of Rabbi Yitzchok Leib Kirzner in these words: “He was the number-one person for me who stood for and was the living link in the chain from Har Sinai until now. I feel that he was the link to all the European yeshivos of the past. ... He helped many *baalei teshuvah* connect to that world of *bnei Torah*, and he made it much less intimidating and very welcoming.”

Indeed, both his parents had their roots in that lost European world. Rabbi Kirzner combined the best of two worlds: the Litvish and the Chassidish. His father, Reb Zelig Kirzner, z”l, grew up in the White Russia area in a Litvish family. Reb Zelig studied in the Mirrer Yeshivah and in 1941 fled to Shanghai with the yeshivah. His mother, Fraidel Wenkert, an only child who lived in Vienna, came from a long line of Tchortkover chassidim. Her family also fled to Shanghai during the war, and their *shidduch* was made in Shanghai. The rest of Rabbi Kirzner’s family perished.

### SENSITIVITY, SCHOLARSHIP, AND SPIRITUALITY

After the war in 1947, the Kirznerns came to the United States. Although they first settled in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where Rabbi Yitzchok Leib was born

(6 Nisan 5711/April 12, 1951), eventually they moved to New York. He was the third of five children, four boys and a girl, who was the youngest.

Dovid Kirzner, Rabbi Kirzner’s eldest brother, describes the Brooklyn neighborhood where they grew up: “The neighborhood around Avenues K, L, and Nostrand was not *frum*; at that time there were mostly secular Yidden or non-Jews on the block. We grew up with a sense of pride in who we were ... we felt privileged. The family felt a responsibility to reach out to other Yidden. We brought people home who showed an interest.” It was a collaborative effort of the family, he says, and he feels that this atmosphere “had a lasting impact” on his brother.

According to Dovid Kirzner, Yitzchok “stood out in the family; he was different. He had a seriousness about him, and even as a child he had great *middos*. He had a tremendous sensitivity to other people’s feelings and needs. He intuitively understood other people... He had a great sense of humor, which was in no way a contradiction to his seriousness. He made everyone in the family laugh.

“He was a good kid. Everyone was proud of him — even as a child. He would take the initiative to help; you didn’t need to ask. He was very easy to get along with.” He was a well-behaved, scholarly kid, and according to his mother, he was by nature “very connected to spirituality.”

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Rabbi Kirzner studied in Torah Vodaas in Williamsburg and the Mesivta of Crown Heights. He continued learning in the *shiur* of Harav Feivel Cohen, *shlita*, in Flatbush. Rabbi Kirzner was also greatly influenced by the teachings of Hagaon Harav Yitzchok Hutner, *zt"l*, Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin in Flatbush. Although he wasn't his *talmid*, he attended the Rav's "maamarim" for several years, and they had a strong effect on him. Harav Chaim Segal, *zt"l*, also had a strong influence on him. These *rebbeim* had a notable impact on his personal development.

In the late 1960s he entered the yeshivah in Lakewood and became a *talmid* of Hagaon Harav Shneur Kotler, *zt"l*. In Lakewood, he was also close to Harav Shimon Eider, *zt"l*, and Harav Shmuel Blech, *shlita*.

In Kislev/November 1974 Rabbi Kirzner married Frumie Kaplan, daughter of Harav Boruch, *zt"l*, and Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, *a"h*, the founders of Bais Yaakov in America. Rebbetzin Frumie Kirzner became a full partner in her husband's work. They lived in Lakewood for four years before they became part of an unusual undertaking.

### GOING WEST: THE CALIFORNIA SCENE

Rabbi Kirzner's *gadlus* in Torah was recognized early on. In 1978 a small, unique *kollel* of Lakewood *yungeleit* was being started in Los Angeles, and he was invited to join it. He accepted the offer and moved to California with his family. As part of the *kollel* program,  
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member was required to do something for the community. *Hashgachah pratis* arranged that Rabbi Kirzner was chosen to give a Shabbos *shiur* for *baalei teshuvah* on the weekly *parashah*. He was, according to his wife, "an instant, wild success."

Rebbetzin Kirzner notes that he was "fantastic with words, but of course, words don't make a speech; it was the thoughts and ideas, the depth and clarity of his thoughts that took everybody." He was, she says, "a deep thinker. He had the ability to make a very profound thought clear and accessible."

He never talked down to his audience. Many people told her that "they were amazed that he could teach to a room [with both] *talmidei chachamim* and beginners. They were intelligent beginners, though, and he didn't water down his material. Everyone felt that he was learning something new."

### A SPECIAL MENTOR

When Rabbi Kirzner was just entering the world of *kiruv rechokim*, he met a Klausenberger chassid who was to have a profound impact on him. According to Rebbetzin Kirzner, Rabbi Yehudah Turner, *zt"l*, was from Milwaukee and had been influenced by the Twerskis one generation earlier to become a *baal teshuvah*. He went through the whole Litvish educational system, starting with Torah Vodaas. Eventually he met the Klausenberger Rebbe, *zt"l*, and was pulled in that direction. He was also an accomplished violinist and shared Rabbi Kirzner's love of music.

Rabbi Turner's health was poor and he knew that he couldn't sleep in a *sukkah* in the cold New York winters, so he had come to Los Angeles in order to be able to sleep in a *sukkah*. The *kollel* people used to visit him in the hospital a lot. Rebbetzin

Kirzner explained that Rabbi Turner “was *mashpia*” on her husband “to use his *koach* in the world of *baalei teshuvah*.”

Although Rabbi Kirzner only knew Rabbi Turner for a few months before the latter’s *petirah*, he “idolized him” and looked at him as his mentor. At that point, Rebbetzin Kirzner says, Rabbi Kirzner “was still in *kollel* full time. He wasn’t a teacher yet; he wasn’t reaching out to the world.”

After a few years in *kollel*, he became a *rebbe* part time. He taught in the *mesivta* of Yeshivah Gedolah of Los Angeles in the mornings, and in the afternoons and evenings he gave *shiurim* for *baalei teshuvah*. As a result of Rabbi Turner’s encouragement, he eventually went into *kiruv* full time.

## THE JEWISH LEARNING EXCHANGE IN LOS ANGELES

In 1982 Rabbi Kirzner was offered the post of lecturer and organizer of studies for the Los Angeles division of Ohr Somayach known as the Jewish Learning Exchange, which was geared toward *baalei teshuvah*, both men and women. In addition to the *shiurim* he gave, he had a small, informal shul, a *minyan*, for his students, in Rabbi Yehudah Lebovics’ living room. For the *Yamim Noraim* he rented out a larger space in a building and drew a very big crowd.

Rabbi Avrohom Czapnik, who taught with Rabbi Kirzner at the JLE for a year or two and who is now its director, says that Rabbi Kirzner “was doing outreach before a lot of outreach organizations had begun doing their thing.” Rabbi Kirzner’s former secretary in L.A. marvels at how “he used to drive everywhere around California giving *shiurim*. He’d go anywhere. At one time he was giving *shiurim* at the engineering firm PRW, in law offices, at the Lockheed plant and at Hughes Aircraft.”

Rabbi Kirzner’s secretary also related the following story about the beginnings of the Jewish Learning Exchange. “The office was on Wilshire Boulevard, which

intersected with Detroit Street. They were retrofitting the building, making it earthquake-proof to conform to the building code. It was a two-floor office building with seven or eight offices. While they were doing the construction, one of the main pipes burst and there was a tremendous amount of water damage to all the offices, except Rabbi Kirzner’s office, which even had a sink in the room... His office was untouched. It ended up being the only functioning office in the building. It must have been his *kedushah* that protected the office,” she said.

When the landlord of the building discovered what had happened, he was so impressed and so much wanted Rabbi Kirzner to stay in the building that he reduced the rent. This savings helped Rabbi Kirzner’s efforts to establish and further the goals of the Jewish Learning Exchange.

Rabbi Kirzner’s secretary describes him as a “*tzaddik*, very gentle, *eidel*, sweet, but forceful when he needed to be.” Rabbi Kirzner was “*samei’ach bechelko*,” she said, and he was “light and optimistic.” He showed a “tremendous *hakaras hatov* for anything I did for him.”

She spoke about Rabbi Kirzner’s tremendous sensitivity and respect for women. When the *mispallelim* moved out of Rabbi Lebovics’ home to make their shul in a rented space, they had to construct a *mechitzah*. “Rabbi Kirzner asked my advice about it. ‘What do you think would make the women more comfortable? How should the *mechitzah* be set up?’ he asked me, a *baalas teshuvah*. It was incredible. I told him that the women would prefer that it be down the center. He was always concerned that women shouldn’t feel cut off. And he loved reaching out to people. He epitomized the *passuk* ‘*Yodu es Hashem besimchah*’. At the Shabbatons he was always so happy.”

## A HAPPY HOME

The Kirzner family has eleven children — ten boys and one girl, *bli ayin*



Rabbi Kirzner with his son, Menachem Shlomo, in Los Angeles.

*hara*. Their home was always open, with “people coming and going” continually, his secretary recalls. The children would give the guests their beds and sleep on the floor. She said Rabbi Kirzner was enthusiastic about helping care for the children, taking them to doctors and so forth. She remembers the “*simchah* he radiated when one of his children took his first steps in the JLE office. This was their fifth or sixth child, not the first. Rabbi Kirzner was so excited, he kept saying ‘Look! Look!’”

Rebbetzin Kirzner says, “He had no Rabbi Kirzner with his four eldest sons.



airs about him. He just loved being around the kids ... teaching them. He created a happy atmosphere in our home because he was at peace with everything that he was doing. There didn't seem to be any conflict. If you go in Torah's way, if you just follow Torah totally, you're at peace with yourself, you're at peace with Hashem, and you're at peace with everybody around you. Everything about him was peaceful and *sheleimusdig*."

## A SHE'EILAH FOR HARAV SHACH

Although originally the plan was to stay in Los Angeles for two years, the Kirznerns stayed for eight. Rebbetzin Kirzner's mother, Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, *a"h*, wanted Rebbetzin Kirzner to work with her in the Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn but, as Rebbetzin Kirzner says, her "husband's learning came first." Rebbetzin Kaplan was waiting for Rebbetzin Kirzner to move back to New York and work with her.

Then, in August 1986, Rebbetzin Kaplan was *nifteres* and there was even more pressure on Rebbetzin Kirzner to come back to New York.

Rabbi and Rebbetzin Kirzner flew to

Eretz Yisrael to ask Hagaon Harav Eliezer Menachem Mann Shach, *zt"l*, the *she'eilah* of whether they should move back to New York so that Rebbetzin Kirzner could become the principal of Bais Yaakov High School and Seminary. It was a difficult *she'eilah* because Rabbi Kirzner was so successful in L.A. in *kiruv* and was filling a big need there, but at the same time Bais Yaakov needed a principal. Harav Shach said that they should move back to New York, and they did so at the end of December 1986.

The move was a hard one for Rabbi Kirzner, but he followed *daas Torah*. According to Rebbetzin Kirzner, he was sacrificing his dream of opening a shul in L.A. "The *minyán* had been growing and the *shiurim* were expanding, and they had just recently acquired space in a building for it; it was so exciting for him. ... It was like a dream come true — things were becoming more organized, more orderly."

## NETZACH YISRAEL, THE JEWISH RENAISSANCE CENTER

At first it was difficult for Rabbi Kirzner to find his niche in New York. In the beginning he was still involved in the Jewish Learning Exchange program, and he taught under its auspices in various places in the New York area. However, in 1988 Harav Chaim Kohn, *shlita*, and Rebbetzin Leah Kohn invited Rabbi Kirzner to teach twice a week at their school, Netzach Yisrael, in Monsey, N.Y., which was specifically designed for *baalos teshuvah*.

Early in 1989 the Kohns decided to hold classes in Manhattan so that they would be more centrally located. At the same time Rabbi Kirzner decided that he wanted to break off from the JLE and create his own outreach program in Manhattan. They decided to "join forces," as Rebbetzin Kohn says. They established the Jewish Renaissance Center, a full-time learning program for *baalos teshuvah* in Manhattan. Rabbi Kirzner taught there several times a week.

Rebbetzin Kirzner says that Rabbi



Speaking at the Agudah Convention in 1991; Rabbi Moshe Sherer, *z"l*, is at left.

Kirzner now felt *sippuk*, satisfaction, with his *kiruv* work in New York. "They were very gratifying years." His brother Dovid says, "His *kiruv* work was part of his own personal growth in learning." And his students could sense how much he enjoyed learning with them. One *talmidah* described his *shiurim* this way: "When he taught, he conveyed his own personal enjoyment of the learning and that made it infectious. ... It was so exciting to learn with him. Sometimes he'd be saying something over, and he would explain it, and then he would explain how incredible it was." In giving over the *shiur*, he expressed his own feelings.

Rabbi Kirzner had the ability to communicate with people who had an advanced secular education. He related to each person on his own level. As one person described him, "he was up to date ... he knew how to speak the language." He himself often said that his years in California helped him to learn the lingo. He also had a sharp and delightful sense of humor. His *shiurim* were sprinkled with witticisms to illustrate the points he was trying to convey.

His *shiurim* had an "edge of intellectual sophistication," one of his students explained. "He always taught as if the person in front of him was of the highest intellectual level, even if that person literally didn't know the *aleph-beis*. That was really the secret to his success. He didn't think, 'Oh, well, you're a beginner, so I'm going to teach you like a beginner,' but rather, 'You may not know what the *aleph-beis* is, but you have a Ph.D. in



Rabbi Kirzner, *zt"l*, with, *ybl"c*, Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, *shlita* (L), and Harav Chaim Kohn, *shlita* (R), at the Jewish Renaissance Center in Manhattan in the early 1990s.

(PHOTO CREDIT: ROSLYN DICKENS)

biochemistry, so I'm going to teach you like a person with a Ph.D. in biochemistry.' He would give the deepest, deepest *shiurim*."

Although his *shiurim* were intellectually sophisticated, he was able to relate to the feelings of an ordinary Jew and instruct him one on one. Another *talmid* said, "He had the ability to touch people's hearts like no one else."

Rebbetzin Kirzner recalls that people would "gravitate toward him wherever he was; they found answers to their questions ... people confided in him. He helped a lot of people through difficult [experiences], make difficult decisions."

## HIS MISSION CONTINUED

Unfortunately, in October 1989, shortly after he began teaching at the JRC, Rabbi Kirzner first suspected that he was not well. In December, when he received a grave diagnosis, the Kirznars went to speak to the Rachmistrivka Rebbe, *shlita*. They asked him whether to tell people or not, and the Rebbe told them to keep it quiet. (The Kirznars often went to the Rachmistrivka Rebbe, as well as to Harav Elya Svei, *shlita*, the Rosh Yeshivah of the Philadelphia Yeshivah, with their *she'eilos*.)

One of Rabbi Kirzner's *talmidos*, who became Torah-observant later in life as a result of Rabbi Kirzner's *shiurim*, was one of the very few who knew about his illness. She asked him at that time why he

didn't want people to know that he was sick. He answered, "I didn't tell people because ... sometimes people call me at 3:00 a.m. and I don't want them to stop doing that." He was "matter-of-fact about his mission," she remarked.

Rabbi Kirzner gave a *shiur* called "Living and Growing with Suffering" as part of a series entitled "Why the Innocent Suffer." In this *shiur* he spoke about having a mission. "If a Jew lives with selflessness to begin with and ... every moment of life is to serve, then suffering is obviously something that G-d is sending to his emissary, because the service requires that kind of a thing at this point... This is a unique capacity that a Jew can have in terms of suffering — knowing to begin with that he doesn't live for himself. ... The Jewish view of the gift of life is that if I was brought into this world and I was given life, I was given life to address a certain spiritual calling and mission that G-d expects, hopes, and invests in me, that I will accomplish while I'm here. So basically what I'm saying is that we are not private citizens, but we are all delegates and emissaries of G-d's callings and missions for this world."

Rebbetzin Kirzner confirms that although her husband was sick, "he didn't slow down one bit." He continued to give *shiurim* at the Jewish Renaissance Center. He went on to open his shul, Kol Yehudah, in Boro Park (in 1990), and he gave many *shiurim* there. (The shul was named in honor of his mentor, Rabbi Yehudah Turner, *zt"l*.)

In addition to the classes he gave in Manhattan and in his shul, he was giving

*shmuessen* two nights a week at the Rabbeinu Jacob Joseph Yeshivah in Edison, N.J. (*Me'oz Latam* is a collection of some of these *mussar shmuessen*, and a nephew is now compiling another *sefer* based on these *shiurim*.)

Rabbi Kirzner had been the *mashiach* at RJJ Edison for about two years when he was offered the position of Rav there, which he accepted. The family was all packed up to move to New Jersey when his health took a turn for the worse. Even then, he was still available for his *talmidim*. Before he left his house for the last time to check into the hospital, before his departure to Mexico for an alternative treatment, he gave counsel to someone on the telephone. He never wanted to say no to anyone who needed him.

In spite of his illness, Rabbi Kirzner taught at the JRC for three years, until three weeks before he was *niftar*. Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner passed away in Mexico on 26 Tishrei/October 23, 1992, at the age of 41.

Rabbi Lebovics, in giving *kevod ha'acharon*, pointed out the incredible *hashgachah pratis* involved in his passing. Because Rabbi Kirzner was *niftar* in Mexico, it was possible to hold his *levayah* on Motzoei Shabbos in Los Angeles, in Brooklyn on Sunday morning, and then in Yerushalayim the same day. It was a *zechus*, he pointed out, that Rabbi Kirzner was honored by all those who loved him on both coasts and in Eretz Yisrael. Rabbi Lebovics also said that in a way "it was Rabbi Kirzner's *chessed*, it was like his personality ... that he allowed everyone to say goodbye to him." M

*To be continued...*

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.



At a *bris*: Rabbi Kirzner is third from left.