



Spreading the **Eish HaTorah**

The Vhaarev Na Program

by YOSEF HERZ

Can Simchas Torah fall in April? For thousands of bachurim, the answer would be a resounding, definitive “yes!” In fact, it happens every year in Monsey’s Atrium Plaza when the Vhaarev Na program hosts its annual “Simchas HaTorah.” The event sees well over 1,000 bachurim converge on the hall during Pesach bein hazmanim to be mesayem a masechta, celebrate a zman of unparalleled dedication to limud Torah and revel in true simchas haTorah.



Bachurim celebrating with their *Gemara* at the Simchas HaTorah event.

Sweetening Torah for All

Rabbi Dovid Newman, the visionary *Rebbi* behind Vhaarev Na, relays the history of how the program came to be what it is today.

Rabbi Newman was a *Rebbi* in a popular *mesivta* in Monsey, yet he was troubled that out of a *shiur* of 20 *bachurim*, only half of them were “getting it.” The rest remained ambivalent about their learning — and that was on a good day!

“Yet Torah is the most sublime of all pleasures!” he exclaims. “Dovid Hamelech describes Torah (*Tehillim* 19:11) as ‘*Hanechemadim mizahav u’mipaz rav, u’mesukim midevash* — More desirable than gold, than even an abundance of fine gold, and sweeter than honey!’ So how can *limud haTorah* be something taxing, even burdensome, for our *bachurim*?”

He answers his own question with an analogy: “Do you like candy?” he asks. After confirming that the answer is yes, he delivers his punchline. “Yet you still wouldn’t eat it with the wrapper on. Why? Because even when something is sweet, you have to get to the essence of it, which sometimes involves removing the wrapper. The same is true of *Gemara*. If you understand it and it is clear, then learning it is the most *geshmake* pleasure in

the world. But to get there, you have to remove the wrapper. And the only way you’ll get there is through *chazarah* over and over again. Only through constant *chazarah* can one taste the sweetness contained within every word of Torah.”

However, “*bachurim* will be motivated to put in the required *koach* to remove the many wrappers only if they want to — themselves. There is a certain *koach* in being an *eino metzuveh v’oseh*,” Rabbi Newman says.

He proves his point with another *mashal*: “Imagine a mother tells her daughter that if she wants to go out with her friends, she must clean up the kitchen. Picture how that girl would clean — probably begrudgingly and just enough to be ‘*yotzei*’ to be allowed to go out. Now, let’s picture another scenario: A girl wants to surprise her mother with a clean kitchen after a long day. That girl would be happily scrubbing until the kitchen is sparkling! The obvious difference between the two is that while the first girl feels like she has to clean up and treats it as a chore, the second girl is cleaning because of her own desire; she wants to, and so the attitude and results are incomparable.”

But the million-dollar question, says Rabbi Newman, is how do you get a *bachur* to want? Rabbi Newman has yet a third *mashal*, this one from an unlikely source: the circus elephant. Why, he asks, doesn’t an elephant in captivity ever simply walk out of its restricted confines? Surely, no measure can be taken to stop the 10,000-pounder from going AWOL! The answer imparts a lesson we can all internalize.

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Rabbi Newman speaking at a Vhaarev Na event.

“It’s the mindset, not the ability, holding him back” says Rabbi Newman. “When a baby elephant is born, weighing in at a mere 200 pounds, its trainers tie a weighty peg around its leg. When it tries to move, it simply can’t. It develops a mindset that it can’t move with a rope attached to its leg, and after a few months it stops trying.

“In our own way, we humans suffer from the same limiting belief in ourselves, unwilling to leave our self-created comfort zones. A *bachur* who has yet to taste the sweetness of learning develops a self-perception that he can’t taste it. However, there is a way out of that mindset. When a fire once broke out at a circus, the elephants pulled out the pegs and ran out in the ensuing hysteria. Even after the handlers caught up with them, the elephants now knew their true abilities and had to be released into the wild.”

It is a cute *mashal*, but the *nimshal* is a reality that Rabbi Newman sees every day. “When we light a fire of Torah, of *ahavah* toward the *bachurim*, of *chashivus* for what we’re doing, and we show them that we trust them, then that can break that mindset of limiting belief in themselves.”

Rabbi Newman was determined to “get every *bachur*’s engine running, to get them to *want* to learn.” He slowly but surely did away with tests and performance-based programs to remove any external pressure. Instead, he doubled down on *chashivus*, *ahavah* and trust, stressing his battle cry of *chazarah*, *chazarah*, *chazarah*, again and again and again.

Rabbi Newman’s approach wasn’t a novel one. *Sifrei Chazal* are replete with references about the importance of constant review. What Rabbi Newman did was put a philosophy into practice, making a regimen out of review, over and over and over again.

“Once a *bachur* tastes the sweetness of *Gemara*, it goes into him, into his *neshamah*, and the levels he can achieve are limitless,” says Rabbi Newman. Not surprisingly, Rabbi Newman noticed a dramatic change in his *talmidim*’s attitude toward learning – and even their *davening* improved.

“The results of the new *mehalech* were not normal!

Bachurim who had a hard time sitting for one hour were sitting and learning for hours on end! I had *talmidim* who had previously not opened a *gemara* out of the classroom walking to and from shul talking in learning and having serious *sedarim* during *bein hazmanim*.”

It wasn’t only Rabbi Newman who noticed the change. One *bachur* testifies, “In September, I hated going to yeshivah and learning *Gemara* was dreadful. Now in June, after a year of *Vhaarev Na* and ‘owning’ a *masechta*, I love yeshivah, and *Gemara* is my life!”

Another spoke about how *Vhaarev Na* transformed him, saying, “I always ‘wanted to want’ to learn, but *Gemara* was not *geshmak*, so I put all my energy into the English subjects. Finally, I was introduced to the *Vhaarev Na* program, which taught me that it is quality, not quantity, that counts. It’s the *chazarah* over and over that makes the *Gemara* enjoyable. Now my life is born anew. I want, enjoy and love to learn!”

Like the *pach shemen* found by the Chashmona’im in the Beis Hamikdash, Rabbi Newman’s method had a greater impact than anyone could have ever imagined, increasing the light of Torah and illuminating the lives of *yeshivah bachurim*, one *chazered blatt* at a time. Today, just a few years after Rabbi Newman sought to change the *cheishek* for learning in his own *talmidim*, there are thousands of *bachurim* in yeshivos the world over participating in the *Vhaarev Na* program. The *bachurim* learn to make *Gemara* “*chazerable*.” The Mirrer *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, *zt”l*, articulated the next step, which has since become *Vhaarev Na*’s slogan: “*Chazarah, chazarah, chazarah* and then? *Chazarah!*”

Simchas Torah in April

The participating *bachurim* learn in *mesivot* from Melbourne to Miami to Manhattan, from Lakewood to Los Angeles and everywhere in between. With every *masechta* completed, each *bachur* makes his own *siyum*, according to the Torah its rightful honor. Yet the program reaches its climax when, once a year, they all gather to celebrate their accomplishments together in the “*Simchas HaTorah*” event *Vhaarev Na* hosts during Pesach *bein hazmanim*.

The grand *siyum* at a *Simchas HaTorah* event.






So what does Simchas Torah look like on a weekday afternoon in April? It starts off with a four-hour “retzufos” (consecutive) *seder*. All *bachurim* put away their phones and are *makabel* not to speak any words outside of learning for the duration of the *seder*. There is then a grand *siyum* with hundreds of *mesaymim* – many of them finishing a *masechta* for the umpteenth time, followed by lively singing and singing.

One year, during his poignant address at the Simchas HaTorah, Rabbi Newman highlighted the *mesirus nefesh* that the *bachurim* have for their learning, telling the following story: “There is a *bachur* here who had 16 *blatt* left to review before the *siyum* when he broke his jaw with just two weeks to go. He had two surgeries during these last two weeks and was unable to use his mouth – not even to say hello. But he was able to use his eyes. And so he used his eyes and he used his heart and he used his *neshamah* and made his 31st *siyum* on his *masechta* at our Simchas HaTorah!”

After a recent Simchas HaTorah event, there was a video posted showing the *bachurim* learning, the sheer joy evident on their faces as they plowed through one *blatt* after another, going through the *dapim* over and over again, completely submerged in the *yam haTalmud* for four consecutive hours.

Then came the *siyum*. Hundreds of boys in Shabbos attire stood on the dais, chorusing the *Hadran*, pronouncing each word deliberately and with meaning. Rabbi Newman then said the *Kaddish*, and a thousand strong answered “*Yehei Shmei Rabbah*,” their voices reverberating throughout the cavernous hall.

Finally, the band struck up a joyous song and the atmosphere in the place became electric. Boys were dancing, floating through the air, as they went round and round, embracing their *Rebbeim* and hugging their *chavrusos* to the strains of *Mah Ahavti Sorasecha*. The video zoomed in on the *bachurim*, displaying their gleaming faces as they radiated the truest *simchah* attainable.



Dancing at a Simchas HaTorah event.

“And so he used his eyes and he used his heart and he used his neshamah and made his 31st siyum on his masechta at our Simchas HaTorah!”



Rebbeim and bachurim dancing at a recent Simchas HaTorah event.

together a program for *baalei batim*, which they termed Kinyan Hamasechta.

“What Vhaarev Na is to *bachurim*, Kinyan Hamasechta is to *baalei batim*. It’s the same model — complete clarity through *chazarah, chazarah, chazarah*,” explains Rabbi Newman.

Perhaps this time around it was to be expected, but just as rapidly as Vhaarev Na revolutionized the yeshivah word, Kinyan Hamasechta took off among *baalei batim*. Today it boasts over 100 worldwide *chaburos* and over 1,000 committed members.

Rabbi Pinny Stern, a *maggid shiur* at a Kinyan Hamasechta *chaburah* in Toronto, explains the appeal and impact of the program. “Kinyan Hamasechta tremendously impacts the lives of the participants and changes the trajectory of the homes they are building. The commitment and consistency of coming each day effects the entire day. It becomes the highlight of our days. You can see guys who haven’t opened a *sefer* in a while who now feel so connected that they are reviewing on the subway or during lunch break at work. They bring their *gemaros* with them wherever they travel. There are accountants who are working late nights but call in to listen to the *shiur* from the office. Businessmen arrange their schedules and outings around the *shiur*. The members of the *chaburos* feel connected to something larger.”

And that’s not all. Bringing the revolution to yet another age group, recently a program called Bonai Chavivai was launched. This program is aimed at bar mitzvah boys, encouraging them to go through a *masechta* — and have the *masechta* go through them — via many *chazaros* in honor of their auspicious day. To date, over 750 boys have participated in Bonai Chavivai from seven different cities.

When we light Chanukah *licht*, we see that when one flame lights another it increases the quantity of light without diminishing the quality of the first flame. Similarly, Vhaarev Na is a program that started small but has increased exponentially, affecting thousands of boys and men, while at the same time still inwardly focusing on the quality of each person’s Torah learning, the heartbeat of our nation. ■

A Treasure Not Just for Mesivta Bachurim

A successful *frum* businessman watched the posted video of the Simchas HaTorah and was mesmerized. He was an investor with a knack for identifying a lucrative proposition, and he knew a good deal when he spotted one. He liked what he saw but at the same time could not help but wonder why this exceptional program was limited to *bachurim*. He felt the dividends could be spread further. He contacted Rabbi Newman, who agreed that such a treasure shouldn’t be confined to one segment of the population. Together, the two put