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Parashas Ki Sisa

Milwaukee:
How the Twerskis Built a Kehillah

A MISSION IN

How the Twerski fa

By D. Klein

Milwaukee, located on the shores of Lake Michigan, is the largest city in the state of Wisconsin. It has gained a reputation in Jewish America as a growing *kehillah*, under the vibrant leadership of Rabbi Michel Twerski and his wife, Rebbetzin Feige Twerski. Rabbi and Rebbetzin Twerski have not only led Congregation Beth Yehudah faithfully since 1963, they have spearheaded the development of Milwaukee into a well developed, full fledged, Torah community with their sincerity, devotion to *Yiddishkeit*, and deep, authentic *ahavas Yisrael*.

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Roots of a Dynasty

The story of Congregation Beth Yehudah began in 1927, when Harav Yaakov Yisrael Twerski, *zt"l*, of Hornosteipel, a small town in Ukraine near Kiev, arrived in Milwaukee with his renowned Rebbetzin, Devorah Leah, the oldest daughter of Harav Benzion Halberstam, Rebbe of Bobov, *zy"a*. Having emigrated from Europe, Harav Twerski settled first in New York, but he could not tolerate the large, busy metropolis. He heard that Chicago was home to many Russian immigrants, and he decided to establish a *kehillah* there for those who would recognize the illustrious name of the Twerski dynasty.

However, as he was preparing to settle in Chicago, Harav Yaakov Yisrael heard that a distant relative had settled there and was trying to establish a *kehillah*. Not wanting to compete, he moved to nearby Milwaukee and became Rav of Congregation Anshe Sfard.

Twelve years later, Harav Yaakov Yisrael opened his own *shtiebel*, Congregation Beth Yehudah, and won the admiration of the residents there. Religious, not-yet-religious, Jew, and non-Jew alike had tremendous reverence for the rabbi from Europe, and secular judges even brought cases to him for review. He became a legend in Milwaukee history. In 1952, the shul relocated to the Sherman Park section of Milwaukee, where it is still located today.

The Challenge

Harav Yaakov Yisrael sent his five sons – Harav Shloime, *z"l*, Reb Mottel, *z"l*, and, *ybl"c*, Rabbi Dr. Shea (Avrohom Yehoshua), Rabbi Aaron, and Harav Michel – to learn in various Litvish yeshivos. Harav Michel learned in Beis Hamidrash LaTorah in Chicago, Yeshivas Ner Yisrael, and Beis Medrash Govoha, where he studied under Harav Aharon Kotler, *zt"l*. In 1963 he returned to Milwaukee, where he found an aging *kehillah* totally devoted to his beloved and revered father.

Rabbi Twerski wanted to do more. There was little *chinuch* for the children. Many parents were *shomrei Shabbos*, but they were incapable of transmitting the *mesorah* to the next generation or protecting them from the "American experience." The shul was overflowing on Yom Tov but was not very well attended on Shabbos.

Seeking Solutions

Harav Michel Twerski and his dedicated Rebbetzin, the daughter of the Faltichaner Rav of Bensonhurst, *zt"l*, realized that there would be no renaissance unless they led it. Building on the foundation his father had laid for over thirty years, the Twerskis took a first step: establishing *chinuch* for the children. In 1968, together with Rabbi Dovid Shapiro, another Rav in Milwaukee at the time, they established the Hillel Academy of Milwaukee to provide *chinuch* for Milwaukee's Jewish children. The day school began to grow, and its pupils influenced their families to come closer to *Yiddishkeit*.

Subsequently, in the late 1960s, Harav Twerski founded The Orthodox Perspective, a group dedicated to publicizing Torah viewpoints and espousing proper *hashkafos*. With this group, Harav Michel planted the seeds for a wave of *baalei teshuvah*; he became a pioneer in out-of-town *kiruv* when this concept barely existed. The combined effects of the day school and the Twerskis' outreach efforts resulted in the slow growth of the community. By the late 1970s, a wave of young people had begun to abandon their beautiful suburban homes and were moving to Sherman Park to be closer to Rabbi Twerski and Congregation Beth Yehudah.

By 1987, as the community's size and level of commitment continued to grow, Rabbi Twerski saw the need for more advanced institutions and tried to prepare the way to import a *kollel*.

However, he soon realized that in order to bring a *kollel* to Milwaukee, he would first have to establish a yeshivah-preparatory elementary school. With great *mesirus nefesh*, Rabbi Twerski traveled around the country to raise funds to establish both a *kollel* and an elementary school to maintain the Milwaukee *kehillah*. During his travels, Rabbi Twerski became known across America as a prominent figure.

With *siyatta diShmaya*, the Yeshivah Elementary School of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Kollel were founded simultaneously in 1989. The presence of the *kollel* and school, followed by the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study, a yeshivah high school located in a different part of the city, and the Torah Academy, a Bais Yaakov-type high school that was established a few years later, transformed Milwaukee into a full-service Jewish community.

A Developing *Kehillah*

In the late 1990s, the shul received a grant from the Daniel and Linda Bader Foundation to develop the community. The Sherman Park Jewish Initiative was formed, and a national advertising campaign, "Begin Thinking Milwaukee," was launched. In addition, the Yeshivah Elementary School became the first Jewish elementary school in the United States to accept tuition vouchers. These factors, combined with the fine reputation of the *kehillah*, encouraged many families to move to Milwaukee, and the community has grown exponentially since then.

According to Rabbi Aaron Gross, director of development at Yeshivah Elementary School, a recent survey shows that eighty percent of families living in Sherman Park have moved there since 1989. In addition to the core group of Rabbi Twerski's *baalei teshuvah*, the 130 families in the community now include many families from other cities who have moved to Milwaukee in order to grow under the influence of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Twerski and to benefit from Milwaukee's job market and low housing costs.

A Home to All

Rabbi Twerski represents the legacy

Dancing at the *hachnasas sefer Torah* last spring (l to r) *bachurim*; Rabbi Michel Twerski; Haravi Aharon Feldman, *shlita*; Rabbi Benzion Twerski, and Rabbi Mendel Senderovic.

Dancing at the *hachnasas sefer Torah* last spring.

of generations of Chassidic Rebbes combined with yeshivish learning and exposure to Litvish *Gedolim*. People with varied backgrounds feel comfortable in the shul because it combines the best elements of a yeshivah, a *shtiebel* and a shul. A Chassidic lifestyle is not imposed on anyone; most of Rabbi Twerski's *baalei teshuvah* did not take on *chassidishe minhagim* and send their children to Litvish yeshivos.

However, Rabbi Twerski's *chassidishe hislahavus* spills over into everything he does, influencing the *kehillah* in many ways. This enthusiasm for *Yiddishkeit* is especially evident on Yamim Tovim and special occasions, such as the beautiful *hachnasas sefer Torah* that took place last spring.

Rabbi Benzion Twerski, Harav Michel's son and assistant Rav, commented, "The common denominator here is the tremendous emphasis on growth. If you are not looking to grow, you will not be comfortable here. My father constantly speaks about being a *mevakesh*, looking to grow from wherever you are now and avoiding complacency. And people find his message attractive because he does not stand on a pedestal and dictate orders. Rather, he is growing right along with everyone else."

We spoke with some people whose lives have been influenced by Rabbi and Rebbetzin Twerski, to get a better understanding of their success in transforming Milwaukee.

The Hillers' Story

Mr. and Mrs. James (Yosef Elya and Sorah) Hiller first met the Twerskis almost thirty years ago. Mrs. Hiller recalled, "Meeting Rabbi Twerski was a life-changing experience, as it has been for so many. The Rabbi and Rebbetzin make Milwaukee the unique place that it has become.

"I first met the Rebbetzin shortly after I moved to Milwaukee with my husband and little baby. I wanted to get involved, so I attended a group [meeting] at the Jewish Federation, which was discussing young leadership and Jewish values. One day, Rebbetzin Twerski was one of the featured speakers. When I heard her speak, it was an immediate 'Eureka moment.' It gave sudden meaning to something spiritual inside me to which I had never connected, and I began to wonder. I started attending a monthly *Pirkei Avos* class that the Rebbetzin was giving for searching people like me, and the feeling of return surged within all of us.

"Rabbi Twerski and his wife began a lunch group for thirty couples. Somehow, I dragged my husband along. My husband had never seen a *chassidish* person before in his life, and when we walked into the room, I saw my husband's face and thought, 'This was a mistake.' However, before I knew it, Rabbi Twerski was at his side, engaging him in conversation and creating an immediate connection. The Twerskis began speaking about *mitzvos* in the *parashah*. We had no idea what that meant, but somehow they were extremely authentic and made it sound so human and relevant to daily life."

The Hillers and the rest of the group maintained their connection to the Twerskis, who began organizing various activities including retreats and Shabbatons in northern Wisconsin. For many, this was their first exposure to Shabbos. This group of young, professional, thinking people gradually bonded and grew in *Yiddishkeit*, and they soon began selling their homes and moving near the shul.

Rabbi Twerski always encouraged his *kehillah* to take small steps along their upward path toward Judaism.

Mrs. Hiller said that a woman from New York who was in Milwaukee for medical treatments was a guest in her home. One day the woman said to Mrs.

Chol Hamoed Succos at Rabbi Twerski's shul.

Hiller, "You are so *heimish*, I would never know you are a *baalas teshuvah*. [Mrs. Hiller interpreted this as a significant compliment.] But tell me, why doesn't your husband have a beard?"

Mrs. Hiller replied that her husband worked for his father, who might find it distasteful. The lady said, "*Ach*, there is an old Hungarian saying that nothing is new after three days!" Mr. Hiller did grow a beard, and his father got used to it quickly.

However, Mrs. Hiller emphasized that this is not Rabbi Twerski's style. He never tells his congregants how to look or dress.

"He is the most authentic person I know. He is so compelling, has an unbelievable mind, and always finds the right words to represent the emotions and concepts that he wants to express. He is also musically brilliant and speaks to the heart with his music."

Rabbi Twerski stays close to entire families in his *kehillah*, both parents and children, and many congregants say that he remains "the Rabbi" to their children even after they have grown and moved to other cities.

Mrs. Hiller explained, "My daughter is in seminary in Eretz Yisrael. Her *menaheles* told me, 'Your daughter tells me that she goes to the Rabbi's house every week for *Havdalah* and that it is an amazing experience. What a blessing that you have that in your community!' This is just a reminder for me [of] how fortunate we are. I have been to many places, and believe me, there is no place like Milwaukee!"

Mrs. Hiller enjoys a very close relationship with Rebbetzin Twerski as well. "She is an amazing orator and can speak to any audience. She carries an incredible responsibility as a Rebbetzin and on a personal level acts as a wonderful soul mate. She just understands who a woman is and makes you feel great to be a woman. I remember how I stood at her side with a note pad, watching her bake challah. She taught me how to raise my children and counseled all of us."

The Borsuks' Story

In 1981 Mr. Alan Borsuk was working as assistant metropolitan editor for the *Milwaukee Journal*. His wife was taking a class given by Rebbetzin Twerski at the Jewish Community Council, and his non-Jewish friend was a neighbor of the Twerskis. After hearing so much about this amazing rabbi, Mr. Borsuk called up Rabbi Twerski and asked if he could interview him for a newspaper story.

Rabbi Twerski was not thrilled with the idea and instead invited Mr. Borsuk and his family to spend a Shabbos with him. The Borsuks accepted the invitation and took a strong liking to Rabbi Twerski and his family. In June 1983 the Borsuks moved to Sherman Park, and they have been there ever since.

What makes Rabbi Twerski so successful? "There is no master plan, no secret strategy. It is a very gradual process," explained Mr. Borsuk. It is a combination of being very warm and extremely demanding — not in the sense of [having to do] this or that; he never demands anything specific. He is demanding in the sense of making it clear that one should have high expectations for himself. Whatever you are doing is not enough. You should always be doing more and doing it better...

"That message reawakened a dormant sense of idealism within me, and I found

"It is a community of caring. You know who needs help without asking."

that the secular version of living was pretty hollow. I challenged myself to lead a life that I could defend to myself, that was highly motivating. The *frum* world provided an excellent framework for that lifestyle," Mr. Borsuk added.

He recalled how a cluster of young people, all eager to create something substantial for themselves and the community, moved into the Sherman Park area in the 1980s. By the end of the decade, there were enough people that it was time to move forward. Rabbi Twerski challenged his congregants; they must either go up or go down. Going up meant becoming a full-service Torah community with a yeshivah-preparatory elementary school and a *kollel*.

"We made a decision to go for it," recalled Mr. Borsuk. "It was crazy, because we were a small group and we had no resources, no access to money, but we did it. *Baruch Hashem*, the school has done well and the *kollel* has had a major impact. ... We lead a sound, moral Jewish life.

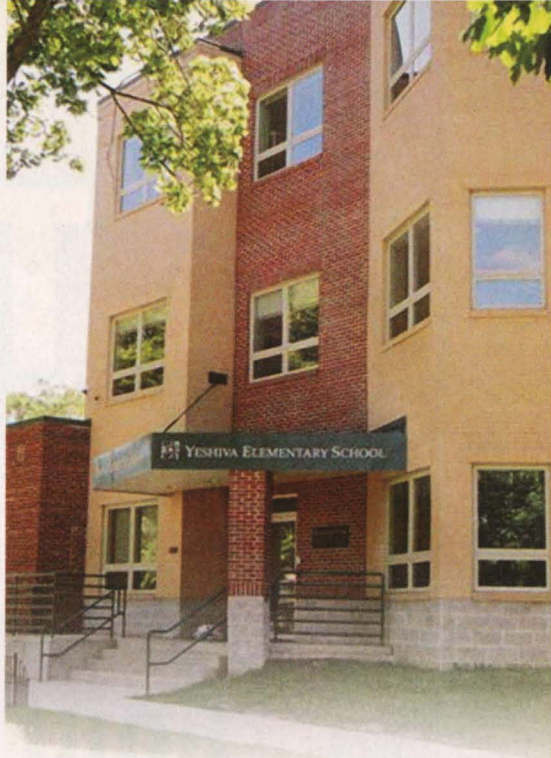
"The shul and the neighborhood have a wide variety of people, but we all get along well. We have always understood why we are doing what we are doing, and we never lose focus or take things for granted. It is a small community and everyone needs to be involved."

The *Kehillah* Today

Today, the shul is housed in a beautiful new building in Sherman Park built in 1998. The community has grown along with the Twerskis' worldwide reputation. Rabbi and Rebbetzin Twerski spend most of their time counseling people who come to Milwaukee from all over the world, as well as traveling around the world on speaking engagements. While Rabbi Michel Twerski is still involved in the *kehillah* and speaks on Shabbos, his son, Rabbi Benzion Twerski, with the help of his wife, Rebbetzin Chanie Twerski, is more involved in the day-to-day running of the community.

Mr. Howard Karsh, a resident of Milwaukee since 1960, commented, "It is a community of caring. You know who needs help without asking."

The Yeshivah Elementary School, which had kindergarten through eighth-grade classes from its founding, is a thriving school with 215 students, whose graduates attend the finest yeshivos in America.



Yeshivah Elementary's school building

The *kollel* is currently under the leadership of Rabbi Mendel Senderovic. *Kollel* members learn in the mornings and afternoons, and spend the evenings teaching classes or learning *b'chavrusa* with community members. Several *kollel* members devote their time to outreach activities. Children of the community spend time in the evenings learning in the *kollel*, where they enjoy exposure to a true yeshivah atmosphere.

"The *kollel* created a central focus of Torah in the community and increased the commitment to learning all around," commented Rabbi Senderovic. "There is an appreciation of the centrality of Torah in our lives. Thanks to the influence of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Twerski, the commitment to grow in *ruchniyus* is prevalent [throughout community]. This makes it easier for the *kollel* to impact the *kehillah*. It is a wonderful community."

Editor's note: This article is intended to provide a taste of the wonderful Jewish community in Milwaukee. It is in no way intended to be comprehensive coverage of all of the many wonderful people and institutions that helped to form the kehillah historically and/or continue to support it today.

(L-R:) Rabbi Yehoshua Levy of Torah Umesorah, seventh-grade *rebbi* Rabbi Simcha Cohen, and seventh-grade students of Yeshivah Elementary at last year's Torah Fair, with Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, *menahel*.