

HOW CHASSIDIM LEARNED NIGLEH

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In the preparation of this article, we were
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The Bochor Who Only Learned Chassidus

On Chai Elul 5658, a year after Tomchei Temimim was established, the first group of Talmidim came to visit the Rebbe Rashab.

Over the previous year, this group of eighteen hand-picked *Temimim* had been studying in Zhembin under the guidance of the *mashpia*, Reb Shmuel Gronem Esterman. The new yeshiva was still very much an experiment, and the ideas we take for granted today—like the two-thirds *nigleh*, one-third Chassidus ratio—weren't set in stone. In fact, each *bochor* was pretty much learning *nigleh* on his own.

When the Rebbe Rashab saw the group, he was overjoyed. "I can hardly find the words," the Frierdiker Rebbe later wrote, "to describe the incredible joy my holy father, the Rebbe, experienced when he saw the *talmidim*. The change in them was so obvious, not just in how they acted, but even in how they looked."¹

During their visit, the Rebbe Rashab took the opportunity to clear up some confusion regarding the role of the yeshiva. Apparently, some *bochorim* had gotten the idea that their primary focus in this uniquely Chassidische yeshiva should be

learning Chassidus—and they spent many hours immersed in *maamarim*, while letting *nigleh* fall by the wayside.

In a letter, the Rebbe Rashab explained that their approach was mistaken. The foundation of Torah learning is in *nigleh*, and studying only Chassidus is not sufficient—just as a person needs bread, not just wine, to live.

But in that same letter, the Rebbe Rashab made another crucial point—it's not just about learning *nigleh*, but about *how* you learn it:

"When a person reflects on the fact that Torah is truly Hashem's Wisdom and Will, they will avoid distorting its true meaning. Their focus won't be on stubbornly pushing their own interpretation even when they realize it's incorrect. Instead, their goal will be to uncover the true meaning and intention of Hashem's Torah."²

When Chassidim Criticized the Rogatchover

In those days, there were two main approaches to learning *nigleh*. Some focused intensely *al asar*—delving deep into the *sugya* before them, trying to understand it from every

possible angle. Others took a broader approach, known as *pilpul*. They would hop from *masechta* to *masechta*, connecting different concepts and ideas and attempting to build new structures by cross-referencing sources. The first approach was generally associated with Lithuania, the second with Poland.

Chabad Chassidim were firmly planted in the former.

The Frierdiker Rebbe once shared a story about a group of young *lomdim* who were learning together, each coming up with complicated *pilpulim*, trying to impress each other with their brilliance. One of them was especially proud of his *leshitasei* (finding the logical throughline of the various opinions) of Rabba, connecting a topic from *Eruvin* with a topic from *Kesubos*.

Nearby, some Chabad Chassidim were learning as well. At first, they remained silent, despite the fact that they didn't quite agree with this approach. But when the *yungerman* began explaining his "brilliant" *leshitasei*, one of the Chassidim couldn't hold back any longer and responded, "It's bad enough that you're tormenting the Tannaim and Amoraim with your *chiddushim*; but why must you drag Rabba in iron chains from Eiruvim to Kesubos?"³

In fact, this criticism was even leveled—though quietly—at the Rogatchover Gaon.

After the Rogatchover passed away, an article was published by Reb Hillel Tzeitlin⁴ describing the *lomdus* among Chabad Chassidim in his youth in Rogatchov, and their perspective on the Gaon.

"The great Chabad *lomdim* were known for their ability to dive deep into the essence of the *sugya*. Others, on the other hand, were more focused on mastering the breadth of Torah—spanning Bavli and Yerushalmi, Rishonim, Acharonim, and Poskim.

"I remember the great Chabad *lomdim* in my town once discussing the greatness of the famed Rogatchover Gaon. As they spoke in admiration, one of them quietly remarked, 'But when it comes to learning *al asar* (on the current page), he's not so *ay-ay-ay*...'

"What they meant was that, while the Rogatchover was unmatched in his encyclopedic knowledge and his ability to weave together pieces from the Bavli, Yerushalmi, Tosafos, Rif, Rosh, and especially the Rambam, he wasn't as focused on the type of deep, precision learning that was so prized in Chabad. For them, learning *al asar* meant dissecting a *sugya*, word by word, going deeper and deeper until you reached its very root, and then growing an entire structure from that root—branches, leaves, and all."

This approach to learning, Reb Hillel argues, was a perfect reflection of the Chabad approach to learning Chassidus.

"This stemmed from the Chabad approach of deep, profound meditation in understanding *Elokus*, bringing that same focus to Gemara and its *meforshim*. Because of this, they didn't put as much emphasis on being sharp or knowing a lot of information. What really mattered to them was depth. They felt that the Rogatchover Gaon's brilliance in Bavli, Yerushalmi, and Rishonim didn't always have the focus needed to thoroughly delve into the issue..."



PORTRAIT OF THE
ROGATCHOVER
GAON.



BOCHURIM ENGAGED IN DISCUSSION OUTSIDE YESHIVAS
TMIMIM IN OTWOCK. CIRCA 5697.

However, he concludes, their criticism in this instance was misplaced. “They were completely wrong about the Rogatchover’s genius. In reality, he had an amazing ability to combine profound understanding with vast *bekius* as well.”⁵

Infiltration to Lubavitch

Despite the prevalence of the classic Chabad approach expressed in Reb Hillel’s article, Tomchei Temimim soon began attracting *bochurim* from all sorts of Yeshivos, and some were inclined to learn with the other approach.

The Rebbe Rashab was very concerned about this ‘infiltration,’ and penned a clear response to it in Kuntres Eitz Hachayim. Needless to say, this approach came to a swift end.

What did the learning in Lubavitch look like? The following account was penned by Reb Shmaryahu Sasonkin, who arrived at the Yeshiva several years later.

“In Lubavitch, learning was all about getting to the core of the *sugya* to come out with a clear conclusion in halacha. Since the focus was always on figuring out the practical halacha, they stayed away from extra *pilpul* that didn’t directly help with that. Instead, they focused only on what was necessary to understand the *sugya* properly.

“We would go from the earliest Rishonim all the way to the latest Acharonim. First, we would learn through the *sugya* with Rashi and Tosafos. Once we had a solid grasp of it, understanding the differences between them, we would move on to the Rif, Ran, or Nimukei Yosef, followed by the Rosh. After doing so thoroughly, learning the Tur, Beis Yosef, and Shulchan Aruch was much easier—it felt like a review of what we had already covered.

“The Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch served as the guiding

light for those learning halacha, especially Orach Chaim and Yoreh De’ah (wherever the Alter Rebbe’s Shulchan Aruch is available). We would also learn Acharonim such as Pri Megadim, Ketzos HaChoshen, Nesivos HaMishpat, and others.

“Once we had fully mastered the *sugya*, the *teshuvos* of the Geonim were like an enjoyable dessert; we would delve into the *teshuvos* of the Noda B’Yehuda, the Chasam Sofer, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, the Tzemach Tzedek, and others, enriching our knowledge and sharpening our understanding further. In my days, there were a good number of *bochurim* who were exceptionally gifted, so there was no difficult *sugya* in Gemara or Halacha that wasn’t clarified in depth.

“This method of learning suited the *bochurim* well. Most *bochurim* in Tomchei Tmimim came from *yeshivos* where the *roshei yeshiva* were true *geonim* whose goal was to deeply penetrate the *sugya*. Most *bochurim* were Chabad Chassidim themselves, who naturally loved the “*al asar*” style of learning, and this was also true of those who came from the *yeshivos* in Kremenchug and Amtchislav, even though those *roshei yeshiva* were not Chabad Chassidim.

“In Kremenchug, the rosh yeshiva was the renowned *gaon*, Reb Yitzchok Zev Zuckerman, known as ‘the Gadol,’ and in Amtchislav it was the *gaon* Reb Elchonon Wasserman. Both of them avoided excessive *pilpul* and taught their students with their clear and brilliant minds, ensuring the *sugya* was understood with clarity.

“However, some students from other *yeshivos*, where the focus was purely on creating new *chiddushim* and engaging in excessive *pilpul*, managed to slip into Lubavitch. The moment this ‘foreign spirit’ entered the Beis Midrash, the Rebbe Rashab sensed it. He strongly opposed it, issuing sharp warnings to distance oneself from this foreign style of learning.

“He explained that when the sole purpose of study is to invent new ideas, there is no proper focus on understanding the true meaning of the halacha. As a result, these students often didn’t even know the actual halacha itself, because their desire to innovate prevented them from truly engaging with the subject. The Rebbe Rashab pointed out that the Zohar says that learning in such a way strengthens the forces of the *sitra achra*. If a halachic decision is based on such baseless *pilpul*, it is spiritually damaging, even dangerous.

“True *pilpul*, the Rebbe Rashab said, can only happen after one has fully understood the clear, straightforward halacha. But if one starts with *pilpul* before properly understanding the *sugya*, that *pilpul* is bound to be false.

“By the time I arrived, this approach had already been eradicated, thanks to the Rebbe Rashab’s powerful words.





BOCHURIM STUDYING AT 770 IN THE 5720s.

Those who had adopted this problematic approach abandoned it and returned to the proper path in learning, following the Rebbe's guidance.⁶

But A Little Rogatchover is Necessary

Reb Yehuda Eber was the rosh yeshiva of Tomchei Temimim in Poland (his writings are published under the name Shaarei Yehuda). At one point, the Friediker Rebbe asked for the Rebbe's opinion on Reb Yehuda, and the Rebbe shared his positive impression of his style of learning:

"It is difficult to determine based on short, superficial conversations, but one good thing is immediately noticeable: his style of learning focuses *al asar*, on the particular piece he is learning, without drawing proofs from faraway sources—instead focusing on the logic in the *sugya* itself."⁷

This focused approach to learning remained the central pillar of *nigleh* in Tomchei Temimim for generations. When many *yeshivos* began to take this approach a step further, learning in the analytical style of Reb Chaim Brisker, the Rebbe was supportive of it as well.⁸

This was reflected in the Rebbe's request for *bochurim* to publish *chiddushei Torah*. At the time, some elder Chassidim were very puzzled; *chiddushim* had never been a focus in Tomchei Temimim—was the Rebbe suddenly changing directions?

When Reb Shlomo Chaim Kesselman sent his concerns in a letter to the Rebbe, the Rebbe replied with an important clarification. The Rebbe was not asking for *bochurim* to suddenly change their approach to learning and start searching for *chiddushim* and *pilpulim*. The *kovetz ha'aros* printed in America, the Rebbe told him, focused on *hasbara* (clarifi-

cation), not *chiddushim*. If a *bochur* learns a *sugya* well and has genuine clarity in it, he will undoubtedly uncover new insights and ideas that enhance his learning. These were the *ha'aros* the Rebbe was looking for.⁹

However, the Rebbe was not content with *bochurim* utilizing *only* this approach. Perhaps both were necessary.

During a *sicha* on Simchas Torah 5736, the Rebbe noted that "there is the approach of learning *al asar*, which can be a simple reading or a deeper understanding of the matter, but there is also another approach to Torah learning, the approach of the Rogatchover—that there is no 'local issue' in Torah; every *sevara* (logical thought) in Torah can be shown to connect, on a deeper level, to seemingly unconnected places.

"This approach necessitates preparation and time, and yeshiva *bochurim* are otherwise occupied. Still, since this approach demonstrates the richness and beauty of Torah, it is worthwhile to occasionally listen to a shiur in this approach. It would convey a sense of the depth and breadth of Torah not only in the specific topic they are learning, but in the general approach to Torah learning as well."¹⁰ **T**

1. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz vol. 10, p. 367.
2. Igros Kodesh Admur Harashab vol. 1, p. 199.
3. Sefer Hasichos 5702 p. 28.
4. A fascinating character who was raised as a Chabad Chossid and—after some 'detours'—came back to Chassidus later in life. See sidebar in "One More Front," Derher Adar I 5784.
5. Kramim.info/article/-גדל-מאת-ר-הגאון-הרוגוצובי-הסביבה-שבה-גדל-מאת-ר-הלל-צייטלין/61391797
6. *Zichronosay* p. 59.
7. Igros Kodesh Admur Harayatz vol. 15, p. 87.
8. See Bnei Heichalah issue 1, p. 41.
9. Igros Kodesh vol. 18, p. 525.
10. Sichos Kodesh 5736 vol. 1, p. 147.