

Machon Iyun Halacha: Taking Learning To A Whole New Level

By Rabbi Shmuel Simenowitz

The celebrated *maggid* of Yerushalayim, Rav Shalom Schwadron *zt"l*, was once asked how he became a *talmid chochom*. He quipped, "I became a *talmid chochom* in a minute - a minute here, a minute there." Hopefully, as we approach the end of *Sefirah* and the upcoming *Yom Tov* of *Shavuot*, we, too, have shifted - and indeed elevated - our perspectives from merely counting the days to making our days count.

I recall attending a *semichah* banquet in Yerushalayim many years ago. Rav Eziel Auerbach, son of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach *zt"l*, was addressing the crowd. He told the story of Rav Avrohom Borenstein, the *Avnei Neizer*, who in addition to being the *admor* of Sochatchov, was a *maggid shiur* par excellence. Students flocked to Sochatchov to drink deeply from the *rebbe's* sharp insights and wondrous *chiddushim*. Tragically, the *rebbe*, who suffered his entire life from lung problems, developed a throat problem and was unable to continue teaching. Undeterred, he realized that he had to change his medium and began writing his Torah insights, which he eventually published as the now classic work, *Iglei Tal*.

Rav Auerbach concluded with the message that although the teaching medium might change, the message not only remains intact, but has the potential to reach an even greater number of people. He was referring to a fledgling endeavor to disseminate Torah over the internet and, more specifically, to his father's *talmid*, Rav Dovid Ostroff, a *talmid chochom* originally from South Africa who had begun writing and giving online *shiurim* in *hilchos Shabbos* several years earlier.

Initially, many - myself included - were skeptical as to whether such a venture could succeed and whether *shiurim* sent by e-mail could ever be a substitute for toiling in a "brick and mortar" setting. Incredibly, and much to my own surprise, I found that Rav Ostroff's *shiurim* were permeated with his *varmkeit*, his gentle and playful way of sculpting *neshamos* and broadening his students' knowledge and understanding of the intricacies of *hilchos Shabbos*, all while deepening their commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*.

More than a decade later, Rav Ostroff has completed the *Shabbos* cycle several times and has tested hundreds of *talmidim*, hailing from all over the world. His students include lawyers, doctors, college professors, financial advisors, engineers and farmers, among many others - students with a passion to learn, who wish to continue learning, but may not have the time or opportunity to participate in a set *sefer* of learning.

With all those years of online tutelage under his belt, Rav Ostroff has joined a new venture, transcending and surpassing the growing pains of internet learning and taking it to the next level. He has teamed up with Rav Aharon Schenkolewski, a Lakewood and Telz-trained *talmid chochom* with years of online Torah instruction as well, to create Machon Iyun Halacha, an e-mail-based *halacha* learning initiative.

When asked what separates Iyun Halacha from other online learning programs, Rav Schenkolewski replied, "Our slogan is 'bringing the *bais medrash* with you wherever you go.' Whether you are on line at the bank, waiting for a plane, or just want to get the most out of a few minutes of downtime, you have our materials at your fingertips. Additionally, we understand the importance of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship towards the success of the learning, so we try to be reachable 24/6 for our *talmidim*, whether in person, by telephone or by Skype. It is the perfect real-time complement to the *shiurim*.

"More critically," he continued, "we don't want to be a one-size-fits-all program. Ideally, our students should have some learning background and be comfortable learning the *seforim* inside. But no matter what level the student is on, he will find his learning skills becoming finely honed as he progresses through the program. Finally, to avoid the 'in one ear out the other' syndrome we have seen in the past, we have developed a system of *chazarah* to enable the students to retain what they learn."

The program currently offers *shiurim* in *hilchos Shabbos* and *hilchos brachos*. "The *shiurim* in *hilchos brachos* are not merely about what *brachah* to say over a bowl of Cheerios," Rav Schenkolewski explains. "Brachos are the keys to the

heavenly palace. There is a reason we recite more than 100 *brachos* each day. They have the potential to elevate every facet of our lives. Using the *Rishonim* and later *poskim* like a treasure map, we plumb the depths for the underlying rationale and logic with which *Chazal* infused the *brachos*."

By popular demand, plans are already underway to add *issur v'heter* to the learning curriculum. Other topics are also in the planning stage.

The fees for the program are quite modest. "Clearly there are costs involved in running a program like this full-time," Rav Schenkolewski says, "but, more importantly, there's an old saying: 'Nobody ever washed a rental car.' A fee-based program mandates a greater degree of commitment by the *talmid*, but the end result - a complete, personal *kinyan haTorah* - is inevitably worth all the sacrifices."

Participants in Iyun Halacha's programs are effusive with their praise. "Machon Iyun Halacha is as close to a *bais medrash* experience as you will find without actually being in one," says Moshe Litwack of Silver Springs, MD. "Where else could I find access to *rabbeim* with a wealth of Torah knowledge? Where else could I have learnt all of those *sugyos* in depth? The materials were clearly written and the *chazarah* reinforced what I had learned. At the end of the day, you are only limited by the time you put into the program."

My own experiences were similar. When I told my own *rebbe*, with whom I have been close since my sophomore year in high school, that I was about to undertake learning *Shabbos b'iyun*, he said to me, "Oh, so you have developed a taste for the subtle." As I immersed myself in the *shiurim*, not only did my learning blossom, but my appreciation for the intricacies of *Shabbos* grew exponentially. Instead of merely seeing *Shabbos* as a disjointed and jumbled group of things I couldn't do, my family and I (trust me, your family will be the delightful, albeit unwitting, beneficiaries of your learning) began to see *Shabbos* as an orchestral score, every note and silence an organic part of a greater whole. As my ability to "read the score" developed, I began to feel like the first chair violin in a divine symphony.

"Time is the one commodity that they're not making any more of," said Rav Schenkolewski. "With smartphones and tablets, there's no longer any excuse not to take the initiative."

So to paraphrase the *maggid*, here's your chance to become a *talmid chochom* in a minute - a minute here, a minute there.

For further information about Machon Iyun Halacha, call 973.878.0142 or visit www.iyunhalacha.org.

Star-K Certification Launches Star-K Kosher Classroom at Torah Umesorah Convention

By Margie Pensak

Earlier this month, Star-K Kosher Certification was represented at the sold-out Torah Umesorah 58th Annual National Leadership Convention by Star-K President Dr. Avrom Pollak, Star-K Kashrus Administrator Rabbi Baruch Beyer, and Star-K Director of Special Projects Rabbi Zvi Holland, who introduced *mechanchim* to the Star-K Kosher Classroom.

The Star-K Kosher Classroom, which debuted at the convention, is an initiative to develop curricular materials for elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. The first group of posters and videos were prepared to present to the 1,800 attendees from throughout the U.S., Canada and elsewhere around the world, to generate interest, feedback and partnership from those who will actually be presenting the materials.

"Just as we do not charge for our extensive *kashrus* education programs and community services, we are not charging for these materials," noted Rabbi Holland. "We wanted the teachers to tell us what materials they would like to see and how they would want them to be designed, rather than us telling them how to teach it. Hundreds of participants, including *roshei yeshiva*, *rabbonim*, principals, *rabbeim*,

administrators and *moros* stopped at the Star-K booth to ask for materials, discuss *halachic* topics, and offer their encouragement and advice."

For decades, as the only major non-profit *kashrus*

agency dedicated exclusively to kosher, Star-K Kosher Certification has devoted itself to promoting *kashrus* through education. It does so through the distribution of nearly 100,000 copies of its quarterly newsletter, *Kashrus Kurrents*, which are distributed free of charge around the world; its various year-round *kashrus* training seminars and practicums offered gratis around the country; the Star-K Kashrus Hotline (410.484.4110), which fields over 100,000 calls annually; its extensive educational website, www.star-k.org; and its groundbreaking *kashrus* videos on topics such as *nikkur* and *bedikas tolaim*.

"The Star-K Kosher Classroom is an expansion of our educational efforts," explained Rabbi Holland. "Our

kashrus programming for the classroom is age-appropriate for children across the spectrum. We are acutely aware that *kashrus* might be our most extensive engagement with practical *halacha* as adults, yet it is apparent from the phone calls we field that there is a gap in our schools' curriculums in this area. Educators have told us that the reason why there is so little classroom education about *kashrus*-related *halacha* is because of a lack of information and materials. Many of these topics require experts in the field, who are intimately involved in production procedures."

"Star-K's participation in the Torah Umesorah Convention has demonstrated, once again, that its dedication to *Klal Yisroel* goes beyond *hechsheirim*," remarked Torah Umesorah's Director of Development, Rabbi Binyomin Holland.

For inquiries, call 410.484.4110. To receive access to the Star-K Kosher Classroom, email kosherclassroom@star-k.org.



Star-K President Dr. Avrom Pollak and Star-K Director of Special Projects Rabbi Zvi Holland at the Torah Umesorah Convention Star-K booth. Photo: Esky Cook