

MILWAUKEE'S DYNAMIC TWERSKI FAMILY



Photos: Michael Rice & Yochanan Jones

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Mishpacha

Tucked away in a quiet city in the American Midwest, Rabbi Michel and Rebbetzin Feige Twerski have somehow managed to become major players on the international Jewish stage. What is the secret of their far-ranging influence? Mishpacha's Yisroel Besser spent an unforgettable Shabbos with the Twerskis and their community, Congregation Beth Jehudah, where he experienced the signature Twerski blend of sublime holiness and total unpretentiousness. As he shares his impressions, we join the Twerskis for a spirited dance in shul, a bursting Shabbos table, a visit to an old-age home, and a quiet talk in a warm kitchen — and we watch them unlock the magical melodies and messages that touch so many souls

by Yisroel Besser

Driving up an icy Route 94 between Chicago and Milwaukee, through the American Midwest, I made a promise to myself. I would not resort to using tired clichés about the cold weather and the warm reception.

Alas, I cannot help myself; it was so very cold outside and so very warm inside.

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My introduction to Reb Michel Twerski, the Hornisteipeler Rebbe of Milwaukee, had come years earlier. It was a dark afternoon near the end of a long winter *zman*, and we were sitting in our *dirah*, our *bochurim's* apartment, in the heart of Jerusalem. Someone came in waving aloft a new cassette tape, entitled *The Music of Rabbi Michel Twerski*. He

placed it in the old tape recorder and the first few notes filled the air.

It was like nothing I'd ever heard before.

A voice that was at once wise and comforting, melodies that were hopeful and moving. It was the kind of music that has the power to transport the listener to another dimension, another world. In the months and years that followed, Reb Michel's voice became the voice of inspiration, the holy expressions of his heart a guide.

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So as I enter the beautiful sanctuary of Congregation Beth Jehudah for Kabbalas Shabbos, I am prepared — indeed eager — to be moved.

It is after the joyous, vibrant *Lechah Dodi*, just after the congregation has wel-

comed Shabbos as one, a united entity welcoming the Queen into their midst.

I prepare to begin reciting "*Mizmor Shir L'Yom HaShabbos*," when suddenly I feel a surge of energy in the crowd and my eyes follow the current to the front of the room. The Rebbe is descending from his seat towards the crowd.

They begin to dance.

It isn't the most lively dance that I have ever seen nor is it the most emotional. What it is, however, is totally authentic: a real expression of joy and inspiration, a resounding proclamation by an entire *tzibbur* that they are ready and willing to let the light of Shabbos shine into their hearts.

I watch in awe as they dance, this crew of Milwaukee chassidim, chassidim with long beard and no beard, with *shtreimlach* and baseball caps, in *bekeshes* and sweaters, their exteriors so different, their innards aflame.

On the *bimah*, a lone boy, clearly hampered by severe physical and mental limitations, dances alone, his beautiful features alight.

At the head of the line, the Rebbe dances, leading ... no, stopping. He reaches out to a small child and pulls him to the head of the line, and then they continue, hundreds of Yidden, their Rebbe and the small boy, their feet pounding out a song of greeting.

It's Shabbos in Milwaukee.

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After davening they file by the Rebbe. For each, he has a kind word, a joke, a thought; they turn to him as flowers turn towards the sun. I am greeted warmly by all the *misपालेलim*, the "*shalom ale-*

ichems" coming at me from all directions. I am inundated by invitations for the *seudah*, and to each I reply that I am eating at the Rebbe's home; then they smile, as if at a secret to which only they are privy. "You will enjoy it," they assure me.

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Reb Michel and Rebbetzin Feige Twerski have built this community, the Torah community of Milwaukee, with their own hands. Both of them scions of chassidic aristocracy, they came to Milwaukee in 1961, when Orthodox Judaism, let alone chassidic, was in decline.

When Reb Michel's father, the Rebbe Reb Yaakov Yisroel, arrived in Milwaukee in the 1920s, it was a bastion of Russian Jews, Yidden to whom the names of "Hornisteipel" and "Chernobyl" were sacrosanct. He soon had a dedicated nucleus of warm chassidim around him, and in his shul, Beth Jehudah, the sacred traditions of Chassidus were carried on. The community revered and loved their Rebbe and the Rebbetzin Devorah Leah, a daughter of the Kedushas Tzion, Reb Ben Zion of Bobov.

But like their brothers all across America, that generation could do little to keep their children away from the lure and attraction of the American street. Their Shabbos tables were empty and still, the children out making money or studying, pursuing the American dream.

What Reb Michel inherited was empty pews and *yahrtzeit* plaques.

So he rebuilt.

He is a Rebbe, but also a father, a counselor, a best friend.

We arrive at the Rebbe's home for the *seudah*, and the guests just keep coming, a seemingly endless array of people being greeted by the Rebbe and Rebbetzin. The Rebbetzin makes each feel welcome, special, honored.

The Rebbe is at once engrossed in the loftiest of tasks, preparing the wine bottles, humming a holy tune, yet also involved in the practicalities; he is carrying up chairs from the basement for the many guests.

This mixture, the fusion of sublime holiness with total unpretentiousness, is evident throughout the meal. The Rebbe is singing "*Kol Mekadesh*" to an ancient tune, hallowed notes with mystical undertones, his face ablaze, when he suddenly

The Rebbe is singing "*Kol Mekadesh*" to an ancient tune, hallowed notes with mystical undertones, his face ablaze, when he suddenly stops and leans over to a guest near him. "It's on page forty-two in the ArtScroll *bentscher*," he says simply, then immediately resumes the holy *nigun*



Hachnosas Sefer Torah



The Rebbe at a Purim *seudah*, surrounded by children

stops and leans over to a guest near him.

"It's on page forty-two in the Arts-Scroll *bentscher*," he says simply, then immediately resumes the holy *nigun*.

His eyes are closed again, but he perceives something. The guest is struggling with the word "*meichalelo*," translated as "from desecrating it."

The Rebbe leans over and explains. "Desecrating the Shabbos is called '*chillul*,' much like the word '*chol*,' mundane. Can there be a graver sin than treating the king like a commoner?"

And the song continues.

Throughout the meal, I am struggling with this question: the Rebbe and his family, such noble, uplifting people, yet the atmosphere, even while transcendent, is still so normal, so comfortable. How are they able to do it; what's the secret of the unique mood at their table, in their shul, across their community?

The Rebbe himself answers my question as he speaks *divrei Torah* at the *seudah*.

He is discussing the weightlessness of the *luchos*, their total freedom from the constraints of the finite and physical.

"And such is the way of the Torah itself and those who learn it, not to occupy any space at all. The great Torah leaders were also the people of the greatest humility. Torah itself, and those who learn Torah, simply aren't there, they don't take up space at all."

And I have my answer: this most unpretentious of couples takes up no space at all.

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The *tisch* on Friday night is done the





The Rebbe is *olah l'Torah* in his *beis medrash* in Milwaukee

“... you must come for Rosh HaShanah and hear Reb Michel’s shofar blowing. I have learned in big yeshivos and lived in major Jewish communities, but never have I heard such a shofar blowing. Everyone else blows with force and power, issuing a resounding call for repentance. Reb Michel’s *tkiyos* are soft, gentle, so moving. His call to *teshuvah* is sweet”



The *beis medrash* in Milwaukee

Milwaukee way; held at the home of the Rebbe’s son, Reb Ben Zion, himself a captivating and dynamic personality. Perhaps at the Milwaukee *tisch* there are no *parenches*, the bleachers so prevalent at more-traditional *tischen*, and no pushing, but here, in the warmth and camaraderie of Reb Ben Zion’s living room, Shabbos is tangible.

The people sing and then the Rebbe speaks.

“What were the two things that drew Yisro close, which convinced him to cast his lot with the Jewish people? Rashi, quoting Chazal, tells us that it was the splitting of the sea and the war with Amalek that were the catalysts for his conversion.

“These two things symbolize the path of a good Jew; these two experiences represent the two facets of our work in this world.

“Kriyas Yam Suf gave us the ability to jump in, to leave everything behind, to throw it all away and take the plunge.

“Then after the initial enthusiasm wore off, after that burst of self-sacrifice, the uphill battle began. The fight against Amalek represents the fight against all those forces that wish to ‘cool us off,’ to lower the flames of our passion and determination.

“As hard as it is to take the plunge, it’s equally hard, if not more so, to keep the battle going, to persist and endure.”

Words that are the essence of this community.

In a conversation, I ask the Rebbe about his relationship with the community.

“When it comes to kiruv, it is a mistake to look at numbers, at how many people or families one brings closer. It is not enough to arouse their slumbering souls and then to move on; the maintenance involved should take years, and even decades.

“This is not the largest Torah community in the country, but it is one of the nicest, because they are all growing, perpetually growing. I am awed by the commitment and dedication of our people here, their willingness to throw it all away, to forfeit careers and relationships, and then, after all that, to maintain this rigorous new lifestyle.

“My father, *ztz”l*, had this incredible *ayin tovah*, an ability to find the good points in all people. I have it much easier; I am surrounded by people who are constantly growing. Of course I love them.”

And thus spoke the Rebbe, “Two sides to the coin, two different strug-

gles; one, to take the plunge, and the second, to keep fighting, to maintain that initial zeal and fervor.”

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At seven-thirty on Shabbos morning, the shul is filled with people, listening eagerly to a *shiur* by Reb Ben Zion. They are studying a collection of chassidic writings on the significance and meaning of the various wedding customs in preparation for the upcoming *chasunah* of Reb Ben Zion’s oldest son. The community will be traveling to the wedding en masse, and they want to be ready.

Reb Ben Zion is far more than his father’s assistant; he is the pride of a community that helped raise him, and they look on with parental joy as he realizes their high hopes for him. For the Milwaukee community, the *simchah* at this *chasunah* is personal.

The davening itself is warm and vibrant, and again, I have that wonderful sense of being part of a group involved in a common endeavor. Davening in Milwaukee is serious business.

After davening, the Rebbe will address the people. There is a sense of anticipation as he rises, as people lean close to hear words that will carry them through another week.

The Rebbe speaks of gratitude, of not taking the gifts of life for granted. He recalls his first visit to Switzerland and his awe at the magnificence and grandeur of the Swiss Alps. The Rebbe recounts how he and the Rebbetzin expressed their wonder to a Swiss native, who was surprised that the view elicited such a reaction from them.

“He sees them every day,” explains the Rebbe, “and he has long ago ceased to be aware of their beauty and splendor.”

The Rebbe urges us to appreciate the abundant gifts of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, to keep our eyes open to the magnificence that surrounds us. He reminds us to be grateful for the ultimate gift — the Torah — not to take its all encompassing beauty for granted.

Then, the Rebbe shares another one of the guiding principles of this beautiful *kehillah*:

“The biggest enemy of the *oved Hashem* is cynicism, jadedness, tiredness. Let’s keep our eyes open, let’s stay fresh and innovative.”

The Rebbe is very much the congregational rabbi as well, and he shifts over to an administrative announcement.

“Tonight we as a community will be going to visit the seniors at the old-age



At the *chasunah* of Rabbi Eliezer Geldzahler, *ztz”l*, and the Rebbe’s daughter Baila, *tichye*. To the right is Rabbi Shlomo Twerski, *ztz”l*, the Hornisteipler Rebbe of Denver; in the center is the Bobover Rebbe, *ztz”l*; on the left is, *yblc”t*, the Bostoner Rebbe. The *chasunah* took place in Milwaukee

One of the more celebrated natives of Hornisteipel was the great Steipler Gaon, Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky. He was referred to as “the Steipler” since he hailed from the town, and was named Yaakov Yisrael after the old Rebbe, just like Reb Yaakov Yisroel Twerski.

Despite the fact that he grew up in the Novardok Yeshivah movement, becoming a strict adherent to the path of Novardok *mussar*, he never forgot his birthright.

The Steipler lost his father at a young age, and his widowed mother was offered two matches. One was a wealthy man who was not learned, and the other was a poor scholar.

She went to ask the Hornisteipler Rebbe’s advice.

He told her to marry the scholar, and promised her that her children would light up the Torah world.

In later years, when people complimented the Steipler’s magnum opus, *Kehillos Yaakov*, a remarkably successful sefer, he would attribute its success to the Rebbe’s brachah.

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Reb Michel tells me that his older brother, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, developed a close relationship with the *gadol* more than a half century ago, in a time that the Steipler was virtually unknown outside of Bnei Brak.

Rabbi Twerski was a *talmid* in the Skokie Yeshivah at the time, and the Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Chaim Kreiswirth, was a *mayven* on the Steipler and encouraged the relationship.

Rabbi Twerski began to send the Steipler letters containing questions on what he was learning, to which the *tzaddik* would reply, signing his name “Yaakov Yisrael ben Brachah.”

Rabbi Twerski ultimately published a sefer of his correspondence with the Steipler on a wide range of topics.

Reb Michel tells of his own visit to the humble home in Bnei Brak.

Reb Michel did not identify himself as the Hornisteipler Rebbe, but the Steipler scanned the names on the paper and made the connection himself.

“Give me a brachah,” he asked Reb Michel.

Reb Michel evaded the request and changed the topic.

“Tell me,” the Steipler said, “are there still Hornisteipler chassidim?”

Reb Michel shrugged, “Not many.”

“Is there a *tisch* on Friday nights?”

“Yes, there is a *tisch*,” replied Reb Michel.

“Good, good,” replied the Steipler, his satisfaction evident.

“When Mashiach comes, Hornisteipel *veht zein a malchus*,” the Steipler remarked.

Then, in a quieter voice, almost to himself, he said “*Veil ess iz gevehn a malchus* [because it was a *malchus*]!”

Then he looked back at Reb Michel.

“Please, before you go, give me a brachah.”



Rebbe dancing with R' Benzion at the Goldner Hachnasas Sefer Torah

home. We ask all of you to participate, to bring your children along, to provide some joy to these lonely people. We have a responsibility" — here, the Rebbe corrects himself — "no, an opportunity, to bring light into the life of another Jew; let's take advantage of it."

His closing words shed light on another wonderful trend in this community. "This week, many of the rebbeim and kollel fellows are away for midwinter break, so we all have to make a special effort to participate. If each of us assumes that our neighbor will go, that we are free to do our own things, then it is the old people who will suffer. Each of you should look at this as if you're the only ones who can go."

Two themes to his words are "Don't grow cynical" and "Feel a sense of responsibility to your community."

I am beginning to see what it is that makes this place special.

At the large *kiddush* that follows, I am speaking with a distinguished and skilled local *mechanech*. "There's only one way to describe the children in this community: *lichtige kinder*, with *lichtige faces*," he says.

A young man approaches me. "If you really want to understand this community, to feel what makes it unique, then you must come for Rosh HaShanah and hear Reb Michel's shofar blowing. I have learned in big yeshivos and lived in major Jewish communities, but never have I heard such a shofar blowing. Everyone else blows with force and power, issuing a resounding call for repentance. Reb Michel's *tkiyos* are soft, gentle, so moving. His call to *teshuvah* is sweet."

There are many reasons to live in Milwaukee. The beautiful stone homes that line the quiet streets near Beth Jehudah are far cheaper than much smaller ones in other Jewish communities. The Wisconsin State Legislature provides vouchers for parochial schools in the city, which means that, for low-income families, there are no tuition payments to speak of. There is a wonderful educational framework in place, with schools for both boys and girls, that have earned a superb reputation. The Chofetz Chaim community, mere minutes from Reb Michel's community in Sherman Park, boasts a world-class yeshivah high school and *beis medrash*, the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study, or W.I.T.S. There is also Torah Academy for Girls, the high school, very much a typical Bais Yaakov.



L to R: Reb Aaron, Reb Mordachai (Muttty), Reb Michel, and Reb Abraham (Shea). This is the dedication of a Torah in the name of their parents.



The Rebbe with his sons R to L: Rabbi Benzion, R' Mordechai Eliezer of Yerushalayim and R' Yakov Moshe of Yerushalayim

The crown jewel of the community, and indeed, the catalyst for the educational framework, is the kollel. The Milwaukee Kollel Center for Adult Jewish Studies opened when Reb Michel realized that, like so many other communities across America, Milwaukee was a victim of its own success.

Though twenty-five years of leadership had yielded beautiful Torah families, the children of these families were opting to settle in Eretz Yisrael, in Lakewood, and in New York.

Reb Michel called together his people and shared his vision with them. Milwaukee would have a kollel of its own, and a new elementary school would have to be formed to provide the children of these families with a suitable educational environment.

Milwaukee is by no means a wealthy community, but its members are people of spirit and resolve. Once Reb Michel spoke, they were galvanized into action.

The Rosh Kollel, Reb Mendel Senderovic, is a respected *posek* and *mechaber seforim*. He had achieved world renown as the author of the standard text for divorce documents that are given in Lakewood, a thorny and complex halachic issue. Since the community made that historic decision to "jump in," committing themselves to forming the kollel and school, membership has tripled, with families coming to live in Milwaukee from across North America.

Today, the community boasts some 160 families, approximately double what it was ten years ago. In recent years, several young couples have opted to stay local as well.

There are many reasons for the community's newfound popularity, but after speaking to the people, however, I see clearly that it isn't the education, the economy, or the sense of belonging and community.

It's the Twerskis.

My interview with the Rebbe is scheduled for late Motzaei Shabbos, and I ask if I can accompany him to the old-age home. Reb Ben Zion graciously reorganizes car seats and several children to accommodate my request.

Watching Reb Michel relate to the old folks, the tired, hopeless Yidden for whom this event is a break in the sad monotony of their lives, is an experience. For each, he has the right words, the proper tone, the perfect message. As he moves through the crowd, he leaves a path of *chizuk* and healing in his wake.

The Rebbe and Reb Ben Zion, joined by a large crowd from the shul, start to sing, and the old people draw close. Many of them remember the Rebbe's great father, these Milwaukee old-timers who revere the Twerski name; he belongs to them.

Reb Michel speaks.

"Today, we read about the giving of the Torah, the commandments. Do you know that before Moshe Rabbeinu would teach the Jews a new mitzvah, he would first go to discuss it with the elders, the *zkeinim*? Each mitzvah was first exposed to the wisdom and experience of the elderly leaders, the ones to whom we owe everything.

"We thank you for all that you, the older people, have given us. You have built this community and other communities; we look at you with such respect and gratitude. Thank you."

The Rebbe sits back down and an elderly woman raises her hand. "Rabbi, can I say something? I have never been happier in my life. Thank you so much for your words, for the music."

I sit down to speak with the Rebbe on Motzaei Shabbos. I had prepared questions to ask and topics to discuss, but somehow, once Shabbos is over, there are

only answers. Everything just makes sense. The Rebbe tells me a little bit of the history of the *kehillah*. The Rebbe's father, Reb Yaakov Yisroel, son of Reb Leibele of Hornisteipel, arrived in New York in the 1920s, and quickly realized that he wasn't suited to the big city. He travelled to Chicago, where there was a large group of Ukrainian immigrants, Yidden from the towns near Kiev.

After a short stay in Chicago, he travelled to Milwaukee, where he was asked to serve as the Rav in the Anshei Sfarad shul. After a decade of service, he realized his dream, opening his own shul, Beth Jehudah, in 1939.

Rabbi Twerski emerged as a key figure in Milwaukee Jewish life, earning the respect and admiration of all types of Jews, and indeed, the wider non-Jewish population as well. His warmth and kindness endeared him to everyone; when the patriarchal Jew with the soft smile walked down the streets of Milwaukee, everyone would wait respectfully for his greeting.

Rebbetzin Devorah Leah was a personality in her own right, an heiress to the noble traditions of Sanz, a woman of generosity. A wise and perceptive lady, she

"My father had correctly diagnosed the state of affairs in this country, and realized that in America of the 1940s, a rabbi without a degree would be disregarded and ignored. A Rav needs to have *devarav nishmain*, his word must be taken seriously, and in those years, a college degree was the only way to achieve that goal" — Rav Michel Twerski



The Rebbe dancing at a Chasuna with his son in law on the right R' Mordche Katz and a nephew Rabbi Hager on the left

spoke several languages and was a much-sought-after advisor to the women of the community.

They gathered a *kehillah* around them, a *kehillah* of Yidden who were completely dedicated to them and all that they represented.

In 1961, Reb Michel and Rebbetzin Feige arrived in Milwaukee to assist his father in running the *kehillah*.

At the time, there was nothing here for a young couple: no friends, no shopping. In addition, the resources and support that exist for the young couples of today's out-of-town communities were nonexistent.

I ask the Rebbetzin a question.

"Was it difficult for you, a native of Brooklyn, to travel across the country to Milwaukee?"

The Rebbetzin smiles. "With my husband, I would have traveled to the ends of the earth."

The truth is that her father, the

Falthichaner Rav, was apprehensive about giving his blessings to a move that would take his daughter deep into the American heartland, far from the centers of Torah and Chassidus. He inquired of the Satmar Rebbe, Reb Yoel Teitelbaum, about a proper course of action. The Rebbe assured him that he would have *nachas* from his "Milwaukee *eineklach*," and indeed, he did.

The Rebbetzin adds something else. "I didn't need friends, because I had something much more precious: my in-laws. It was enough for me to be in their presence, to spend time with them. I derived sustenance from that relationship."

Her bond with her father-in-law, the Rebbe, was special. He looked at her as a daughter and treated her as such.

The young Twerskis began to build, to lay the groundwork for a new community, one family at a time.

Reb Michel and the Rebbetzin formed

a series of groups, called Orthodox Perspectives, that would meet in people's homes. These small weekly gatherings were geared to no more than a few couples at a time. Reb Michel would convey the Torah perspective on feminism and parenting, on marriage, and on prayer.

It was a new way, a new trend, and the families that had left the *shtiebel* and all that it represented were shocked at the clarity and beauty of the path that they had shunned. They watched in fascination as the layers slipped off, showing them the beauty that was their heritage. They looked inward and were shocked to find that, beneath their discomfort and embarrassment at being Jewish, there was a soul shining bright.

They gravitated to the young rabbi who made them feel so alive, so Jewish. A Shabbos meal with the Twerskis became something to aspire to, an encounter with depth, meaning, and

"Kiruv rechokim is not about numbers, about how many people one can have over for a Shabbos meal; it's about the results, the long haul after that initial burst of inspiration. This is a community that had grown together over so many years, that is still growing together"

— Rav Michel Twerski



The Rebbe writing the final letters in a *sefer Torah* dedicated by Mr. Phil Goldner to his *beis medrash*. Looking on is the Rosh Kollel, Rav Mendel Sendrovic, *shlita*



The Rebbe preparing a *bar mitzvah bochur* to put on *tefillin* for the first time



The Rebbe dancing at the Goldner *sefer Torah* dedication



This picture was taken in 1947 on the arrival of the Bobover Rebbe to America. He spent his first Pesach in Milwaukee with his sister and brother-in-law. R to L: Rabbi Michel is holding the hand of the Bobover Rebbe, Reb Shlomo; Rebbe Yaakov Yisroel, *ztz"l*, and Reb Aaron Twerski

warmth. There were stirrings of Jewish life in Milwaukee once again.

From among those groups, one third of the people made the transition to a kosher home and over half of them registered their young children in the Jewish day school.

They would have small Melaveh Malkahs, just the Twerskis and these small groups. At these intimate gatherings between friends, the young Rebbe would take guitar in hand and teach a new song.

They learned how to praise Him with "Romimu" and "Ein Aroch," to thank him with "Modeh Ani," to pray with "T'kah b'Shofar" and "Min HaMeitzar." They learned that Judaism is vibrant and warm, passionate, and real. They learned that it was theirs.

And thus was the community reborn.

Reb Michel speaks with great pride about the accomplishments and sincerity of his people. He speaks of the particular challenges that each of them faces, of his respect for their loyalty and resolve.

He tells one particular story. One day, he received a call from a metro reporter for the Milwaukee Sentinel who requested an interview for a piece that he was writing on the Orthodox community.

Rabbi Twerski realized that the man was a Jew. "You cannot write about us unless you come experience a Shabbos here by yourself."

The reporter, anxious to do a good job, agreed.

He came for Shabbos with his wife.

That was decades ago.

He himself became the article, walk-

ing testimony to the power of Shabbos.

"The week after he made the commitment to become completely *shomer Shabbos*, a Midwest Airlines airplane was involved in a fatal crash, the only such incident in the company's history. Midwest is a Milwaukee-based business, and this was the biggest local story in years.

"The episode occurred late on a Friday afternoon.

"The editors called him up and told him it was his story, that he was in charge of coordinating the various reporters and their angles. He apologized, but said that he wasn't available until Saturday night.

"It was a decision that cost him advancement and honor. He could have gone so far on that story."

As the Rebbe talks, I hear an echo of his words at the *tisch*, "the two sides of the coin, the strength to make the plunge and after, the strength to keep fighting."

Reb Michel underscores an idea which is central to his philosophy. "*Kiruv rechokim* is not about numbers, about how many people one can have over for a Shabbos meal; it's about the results, the long haul after that initial burst of inspiration. This is a community that had grown together over so many years, that is still growing together."

The Rebbe lights up, much like a father talking about his son's accomplishments. "We don't get that many *meshulachim* here in Milwaukee, but the ones who do come always mention to me that the reception they get is something special. The people here perceive that it is hard enough for a person to stick out his hand and ask for help; to refuse the request is telling him

to forfeit his last shred of dignity.

"It is a humbling experience to live among such inspiring people."

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Later, over Melaveh Malkah, I ask another question.

The Twerski family name has come to be associated with the ability to straddle two worlds, to be educated and sophisticated, even while living within the four cubits of traditional chassidic Judaism. The family boasts doctors, lawyers, and professors who are comfortable in Ivy-league schools even as they are most at home in the *shtiebel*.

I ask if this is a *shittah*, a governing philosophy, and if it is, why their children, the next generation, don't attend college.

Reb Michel shares a fascinating story with me.

"My oldest brother, Reb Shloime, *ztz"l*, was a special *neshamah*, holy and pure. As a child, he would learn *sifrei Kabbalah* for hours, and my mother was so concerned that she sent him to my *zeideh*, Reb Leibele, in Antwerp. The Zeideh got to know the lad and assured my mother that it was all right.

"My father sent him to learn in Torah Vodaath, and he became the closest *talmid* of Reb Shraga Feivel, developing as both a *talmid chacham* and a chassid. At the height of his growth, when he was totally immersed in Torah and *kedushah*, the letter arrived from Milwaukee. In it were clear instructions from my father: he was to return home and start attending college.

"My brother was stunned. It was inconceivable to him to leave the comfortable, secure confines of the *beis medrash*

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for the outside world, and he told my father so. My father was uncharacteristically adamant and for a few weeks, the argument raged, neither willing to budge.

“Finally, my brother decided to go enlist the help of a Rebbe, and he travelled to the newly arrived Lubavitcher Rebbe, Reb Yosef Yitzchak. He told the Rebbe of his father’s wish and of his own fears and misgivings. The Rebbe looked at him sternly. “*Ihr hut a Tatte* [you have a father]; *gei freig bai eim* [go ask him what to do].”

“My brother attended college.

“In time, my father’s intention became clear, and even my brother conceded that he was right. My father had correctly diagnosed the state of affairs in this country, and realized that in America of the 1940s, a rabbi without a degree would be disregarded and ignored. A Rav needs to have *devarav nishmain*, his word must be taken seriously, and in those years, a college de-

gree was the only way to achieve that goal.

“When we grew older, my father didn’t tell us to go to college, and those of us who did acted out of our own free will. In fact, in the 1960s, when the social fabric of America unraveled, my father laughed and said that a new generation was arising that would mock those with degrees.

“Education was no *shittah*; rather, it was a *hora’as sha’ah*, a temporary ruling, relevant for the era in which it was issued.”

It is late on Motzaei Shabbos. The Melaveh Malkah candles are burned down to their very bottoms, and the kitchen is bathed in a comfortable light. I rise, trying to find the words to convey thanks for the Shabbos, for the time, for the inspiration.

I find that I cannot.

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It’s Sunday morning, after Shacharis, and I am preparing to leave. I am enjoying one last coffee in Beth Jehudah before set-

ting out for the airport. I step out into the frigid air, the heat of the coffee warming my hand. I take a final look at the building, and a thought crosses my mind.

Approximately three hundred years ago, a great soul came down and planted the seeds of Chassidus in the hearts of the people. They followed him because he spoke the truth, because his words and melodies stirred them.

They listened to him because they knew he loved them, so they loved him back.

Much has happened to the path of Chassidus since then, many twists and turns, some that were confusing and complex.

In Milwaukee one can still make out that dusty path back to Mezibuzh, where everything was simple and clear, hopeful and inspiring.

It’s still happening, it’s still happening.

In 1927, Reb Yaakov Yisroel Twerski of Hornisteipel arrived in Milwaukee, the beer-brewing capital on the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan. Together with Rebbetzin Leah, the daughter of Reb Ben Zion Halberstam of Bobov, he led a flock of largely Russian-born Jews who lived there.

After several years, he opened his own shul, Beth Jehudah, where the customs of his holy ancestors of Chernobyl and Hornisteipel were respected. The Twerski’s were key figures in the development of the community, and even today, Milwaukee old-timers remember “the Rebbe” with reverence and affection.

In 1973, at the time of his passing, Reb Yaakov Yisroel was a legend among the *chassidische* Yidden, secular Jews, and non-Jews of the city, and his passing was mourned by all segments of the population.

The Rebbetzin passed away in 1996. Her brother, the famed Reb Shlomo of Bobov, would visit her in Milwaukee in her final years, and together, they would reminisce about the Bobov of their youth.

In the inhospitable climate of Milwaukee, the Twerskis raised five *chassidische* sons, boys who proudly wore the dress of their ancestors in this new country.

The boys attended public school during their formative years, and as soon as they were old enough, they were sent away to learn in the yeshivos of Chicago, Baltimore, Brooklyn, and Lakewood.

Each one of those boys has made his mark on American Jewish life.

The oldest son was a mystic and profound thinker, Reb Ben Zion Chaim Shlomo Meshulam Zusia, the Rebbe of Hornisteipel-Denver. The Rebbe drew an eclectic and diverse group of spiritual seekers around him, and through his blend of penetrating intellect and unbridled passion, he changed lives.

His *na’anuim* with the *lulav* and *esrog* would take him six hours on each day of Succos, and he spent most of the Yom Tov in private spiritual ecstasy. On Simchas Torah, his dancing was extraordinary, and in fact, it was on that day that his holy soul rose heavenward.

The second son was Reb Mottele, an accountant in Flatbush. He embodied all the *chein* and warmth of his great heritage, and is fondly remembered as a man of great inner rejoicing and serenity. His perception and sensitivity made him a sought-after advisor to many.

In an era before it was common, he would spend most of his day in the *beis medrash*, only arriving at his office in the noon hours. He was accepted as the *rosh hamishpachah* after the passing of their father.

The next son is, *yblc”t*, the noted professor and author, Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski. His many books have changed the way that the Torah community views psychological issues and their treatments, and his inspiring works on Torah, tefillah, and Jewish history are staples in Jewish homes. He lived in Pittsburgh for many years, where he directed the drug rehabilitation clinic that he had established, and presently resides in Monsey.

The last two sons are the twins. Professor Aaron Twerski became the first Jewish Orthodox dean in American education when he was appointed dean of Hofstra Law University in 2005. He has since retired and now leads a commission appointed to study the conditions of rescue workers at the site of the World Trade Center.

Reb Michel has assumed leadership of the Beth Jehudah community, where he has been serving as assistant rabbi since 1961. He and his wife, Rebbetzin Feige Twerski, have become much-sought-after speakers and counselors to individuals and groups from across the country. They are popular lecturers and advisors on a wide range of subjects.

Reb Michel is one of the fathers of the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals, and is viewed as a pioneer in the American kiruv movement. He has become a familiar speaker in the most diverse venues, from college campuses to *chassidische shtieblach*. Rebbetzin Feige’s advice columns and speeches have become a precious resource to women across the world.

Their shul is in Milwaukee’s Sherman Park neighborhood, one of the four Orthodox enclaves in the city and the one which is the focus of this article. There, they preside over a burgeoning community of 160 families. They are assisted by their son, Reb Ben Zion and his rebbetzin.