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# Yated Ne'eman

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Parshas Terumah / Vol. 28 No. 7



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## Saving Lives

A SAPLING PLANTED IN MONTREAL BEARS FRUIT IN ORLANDO / 44

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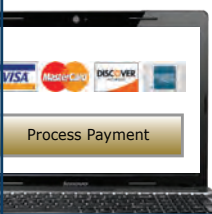
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## A Sapling Planted In Montreal Bears Fruit In Orlando



# Coming Full Circle

BY C.B. WEINFELD

Over a century ago, Rabbi Yisroel Yehuda Zaltsman emigrated from Russia to Montreal, leaving behind poverty and persecution to seek his fortune. He didn't speak the language and had no contacts or support system. All he had was his faith in G-d.

Bentzion Hershovich, who had emigrated from Romania, lived in Montreal with his wife Mindel and their seven daughters and four sons. They were determined to raise their children in the ways of their fathers despite the winds of secularism rampant in that era.

If there are no ewes, there will be no sheep. First, he needed a *melamed*, and Rabbi Yisroel Yehuda Zaltsman fit the bill. When he came off the boat, he met Reb Bentzion at the docks, and they struck up an immediate friendship. Rabbi Zaltsman had mentioned that he had no source of *parnassah* in the new world. Reb Bentzion jumped at the opportunity and told him he was hired to teach his four boys and start the first official *cheder* in Montreal.

Fast forward 108 years. Bentzion Hershovich's great-grandson, David Goldis, is a renowned tax accountant, born in Philadelphia, raised in Far Rockaway, and living in Hollywood, Florida, for the last 25 years with his family. He is involved in *chesed* locally and in Orlando, where a new Jewish community is thriving.

A few months ago, Goldis met Ira Zlotowitz, son of Rav Meir and Mrs. Rochel Zlotowitz of ArtScroll. They discovered that they shared a powerful bond. Ira's great-grandfather was Rabbi Yisroel Yehuda Zaltsman, after whom Ira is named, who had taught David's great-uncles in Montreal over a century ago. Ira's mother, an only child, is like a sister to David's mother,

Hindy Goldis.

Now their shared bond would come full circle as David introduced Ira to the Orlando Jewish community, never dreaming what a pivotal role Ira would share in its growth.

But let's start at the beginning of the second part of our story.

Five and a half years ago, two dedicated *yungeleit*, *musmachim* of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim of Queens, moved to Orlando. Their goal was to build an elementary school, providing a backbone for the tens of thousands of unaffiliated Jewish families living in the area.

Rabbi Avraham Wachsman and Rabbi Yehuda Schepansky, co-founders of the Orlando Torah Academy, the first Jewish elementary school in Orlando, moved to the Sunshine State in 2010 with little more than a prayer and a dream. At the time, there was a small Chabad preschool, a *shul*, and a few kosher restaurants in the area.

Nearly six years later, their school, which opened with twelve students, boasts fifty-nine students, with a new class added each year. This is but a small fraction of the tens of thousands of Jewish families, mostly secular, who have made the "magical city" their home. Twenty young, *frum* families have moved to the area, and an *ei-ruv* is in the works.

Orlando Torah Academy is not a typical day school. It's more of a multi-generational family. The children come home from school, faces glowing, sharing what they've learned and asking for more. *Shabbos* invites and community events are par for the course.

A year later, the ground was solid enough to add more infrastructure. Rabbi Dovid Yachnes moved to Orlando to found

the Orlando Torah Center, a *shul* built around the school's success.

"This is not just an ordinary *kiruv* school," says Rabbi Wachsman. "We are actually building a community from the ground up. My father, Rav Raphael Wachsman, moved to Milwaukee many years ago to found a school there. I grew up with this dream, which our *rosh yeshiva* imbued in us, to live in a place where we can impact the community and make a real difference."

While watching a video tour of the Orlando school, you can sense a special *chein* on the faces of the students. It's a place where everyone feels welcome, from the principal's children to their classmates, many of whom had never seen a *Shabbos* table before joining the school.

"We show them what it means to live like a *Yid*, to be a *mentch* and care about each other," said Rabbi Wachsman. "It's a community where it is obvious that every family counts."

The principals were putting in long days, inspiring, educating and fundraising, and then the rug was pulled out from under their feet. Two months ago, they learned that the building that housed their school along with two other tenants was being sold. This meant they would have to vacate the premises within sixty days, in the middle of the school year.

"Our rented quarters is already our second location," the principal explained. "It's very hard to find a building that is available for a school, especially on such short notice. We aren't an established school with a strong backbone of sponsors. The community is young and still vulnerable. If the sale would have gone through, G-d forbid, we would have been left without a roof over our heads, smack in the middle of the year."

Rabbis Wachsman and Schepansky were determined to do whatever they could to save their building. They asked for a meeting with the owner of the property, a gentleman named Larry, a Jew with a golden heart.

"I met with Larry and appealed to his conscience, asking him, 'Do you want to leave sixty kids homeless?' Larry told me he has a serious buyer and really wants to sell. I convinced him to wait, to sell us the building instead. I had no idea how we'd pay for it, but I knew Hashem would help. We hadn't come so far to be abandoned."

Against the advice of his attorney and real estate experts, Larry decided to stop the sale and offer the building to OTA. Rabbis Wachsman and Schepansky promised to somehow raise \$1.8 million dollars by mid-March, or the deal would be off and the school would have to move.

"We knew we didn't have much time, but we put our faith in Hashem and began a fundraising campaign," Rabbi Wachsman recalled.

Herschel Leiner of H. Leiner and Co. spearheaded the save-our-school campaign and its marketing.

"We had to balance the delicate scenario of sharing the urgency of the situation while not creating alarm in the parent body or the school's children," he said.

A creative fundraising and marketing campaign was rolled out with a tagline, "A Home for our Children...A Building for our Future." With the production of building fund materials and a plan for fundraising nationwide, the campaign went public and raised \$275,000. The clock was ticking, and they needed to reach more opportunities and more people.

"There was no question that this project

required a diverse, creative approach to a solution,” said Leiner.

“I knew we’d also need a miracle, but I had no idea from where,” echoed the soft-spoken principal.

The school’s salvation came from an unexpected source: last minute *Shabbos* guests. The guests Ira Zlotowitz and his family, who were vacationing in Orlando for a couple of days during the *yeshiva* break.

“My wife and I decided to take the family to Orlando during their mid-winter break,” said Ira, President of Eastern Union Funding. “We rented a villa for the weekdays, and decided we’d check into a hotel near the local Chabad *shul* for *Shabbos*. It wouldn’t be so convenient, but we didn’t really have a choice, since our villa was a couple of miles away.”

It was then that Ira recalled a friend, David Goldis, whose mother is a close friend of Ira’s mother, Rebbetzin Rochel Zlotowitz. They had met just a few months earlier in New York.

“My mother had introduced me to David, who was a family friend and a tax accountant, and we hit it off right away,” said Ira. “I knew David lived in Hollywood, and I asked if he knew of a place where our family could stay for *Shabbos*, close to a *frum shul*.”

“When Ira called me, telling me he was planning to check into a hotel, I told him I had a better idea,” David shared. “I know Rabbi Yachnes, rabbi of the Orlando Torah Center, for 25 years. I was just at his house for *Shabbos* in December, celebrating my triplets’ eighth birthday. I have learned *mussar* weekly with his father, Rabbi Avrohom Yachnes, since I moved here in 1990.

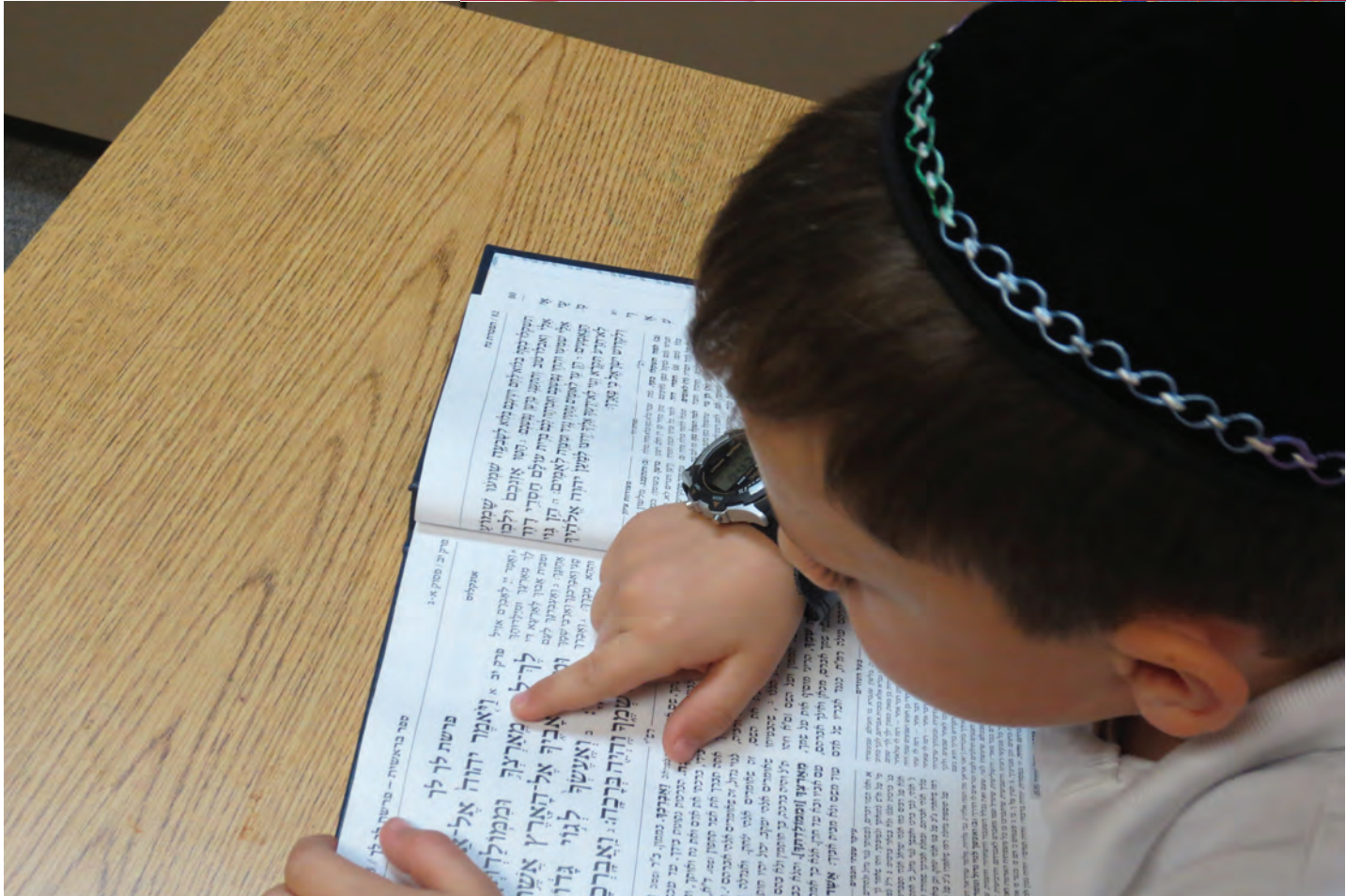
*chan* to help Ira enjoy a beautiful *Shabbos* in Orlando. Little did I know that this *Shabbos* would be the catalyst for something greater.”

When Rabbi Wachsman shared with Herschel Leiner that the Zlotowitz family would be joining them for *Shabbos*, his reaction was, “Hashem has sent a *sholiach* to help propel this campaign to a new level!”

zes drove up to the Wachsmans home and were warmly welcomed by their newfound friends. As they went to *shul* to *daven*, the two men marveled at how much they had in common. After all, despite our external differences, aren’t we all brothers?

The Zlotowitzes weren’t the only guests of the Wachsmans that *Shabbos*. Yitzchok Rowe, who runs Hatzalah of Queens, had

pressed with the Wachsmans, who are raising their family in Orlando and devote their lives to the school,” recalled Ira. “Before they moved to Orlando, the only options for *frum* families who had elementary school aged children was homeschooling, or driving ninety minutes to the nearest school. There are thousands of Jewish families in Orlando, and the school fills a very real



I’m very close to the family, and told [Ira] I’ll find him a place for *Shabbos* no matter what.

“...I called Rabbi Yachnes to ask him and was told this is the busiest week of the year in Orlando, and it might not be possible. I told Rabbi Yachnes he *had* to make it happen, as only good could come from Ira being in his community.”

Rabbi Yachnes arranged for Ira and family to stay at Rabbi Wachsman’s home for *Shabbos*. “I figured I’d act as the *shad-*

“While I couldn’t describe how that miracle was going to play out,” said Leiner, “I knew the *Shabbos* would be a turning point. Ira is a visionary with a proven track record of performance and success.”

Ira wasn’t sure it was a good idea to impose on a family he never met, but Rabbi Wachsman quickly dissolved his doubts. “He was so warm and welcoming on the phone, making me feel that it was his privilege to host us,” Ira recalled.

On Friday afternoon, the Zlotowitz

some business meetings in Orlando on Friday and was staying at a hotel a few miles away. He walked to *shul* for *Shacharis* and was a guest of the Wachsmans for the rest of the day.

The atmosphere in the home was warm and welcoming, with good food, uplifting conversations, and melodious *zemiros*. But the real story is what happened as a result of the *Shabbos*, and how a chance invite impacted so many lives.

“My wife and I were moved and im-

need.

“In general, the community is upbeat and thriving. I think it’s really going to take off. There’s already a nucleus with a *shul* and day school, and they’re building an *eiruv*. The weather is stunning year-round, employment opportunities are plentiful, and there’s no income tax in the state! You could buy a beautiful house with a private backyard for a song. All we need is a *kollel* and people will start moving in.

“Over the Friday night meal, I saw how passionate Rabbi Wachsman is about the Orlando Torah Academy and the sticky issues they are facing. When I realized that they are in real danger of losing their building and everything they worked for, my brain started working in high gear.

“I brainstormed with Yitzchok Rowe, and we hit upon a creative idea, called ‘Forty for Forty.’ In laymen’s language, it involves crowd funding, where every member of *Klal Yisroel* can either donate as little as eighteen dollars, or lend as little as \$1200. Our goal, though, is to find forty committed ambassadors, or *askanim* who care about the future of the school, to each lend forty thousand dollars toward the save the school campaign. That will bring in 1.6 million dollars, enough to fill in the shortfall.

“There is something unique about this property that made a crowd-funding campaign very appealing,” explained Ira, a commercial mortgage broker.

“The building that houses the Torah Academy has two other tenants, which means it’s an income-producing piece of real estate, even without the school. It has intrinsic value and can be sold in a crisis, such as foreclosure, to pay back the lenders.”

Though crowd funding is very popular these days, it has never been used to help

a school buy its own building. Most schools rely on heavy fundraising and significant assistance from local donors. Since the Orlando community is not able to sustain such a campaign, crowd funding, where people contribute small amounts to form one large loan, was the best option.

“On *motzoei Shabbos*, I texted Ira to ask how his *Shabbos* was,” recalled David Goldis. “He immediately called me back, on a high. ‘I’m planning to buy a house in Orlando,’ he told me, and then added, ‘I have an idea to save the school.’”

It wasn’t just empty talk. By the time *Shabbos* was over, Ira and Yitzchok had the outlines of a plan. A few minutes after *havdolah*, Ira was on the phone, putting it into motion. First, he spoke to Rabbi Zvi Bloom of Torah Umesorah, who vouched for the Wachsmans and the Orlando Torah Academy, a project of Torah Umesorah. He also agreed to help find ambassadors and to be on the board to administer the loan.

“When I finished speaking with Rabbi Bloom, I called Jeff Zwick, a prominent real estate attorney in New York, and got him on board to do the legal work free of charge. The campaign would be based on an LLC, which would oversee the loan. Duvy’s Media, a company that develops websites, agreed to build one for OTA to handle the crowd funding campaign without charging a dime,” said Ira.

When the Zlotowitz family returned to their villa on *motzoei Shabbos*, three ambassadors had already thrown their support behind this endeavor. By the next morning, the movement was snowballing.

Herschel Leiner worked closely with Rabbis Wachsman and Schepansky to maximize their fundraising visits for securing potential ambassadors and general donors, which resulted in much success.

The campaign was launched with the catchy title, “Disney is not the Only Place for Magic in Orlando.”

On the following Thursday, after several days of behind-the-scenes infrastructure, the campaign was launched, and the crowd funding website was up and running.



Here’s where the story turns surreal.

As it happens, that Thursday night was the *yahrtzeit* of Rabbi Yisroel Yehuda Zaltsman, Ira’s great-grandfather, who had been the *rebbe* who taught David’s great-uncles over a century ago. Rabbi Zaltsman was the founder of the first *cheder* in Montreal, and his great-grandson was instrumental in saving the Orlando Torah Academy on the night of his *yahrtzeit*! Only the Master *Shadchan* could have orchestrated this.

By Thursday night, there were fifteen ambassadors on board for over 600K worth of loans, with hundreds of donations pouring in. By the time this article went to print, more than half the money was raised.

“The beauty of this campaign is that it’s a risk, but it’s a calculated risk,” explained Ira. “There are other tenants on the property, and we set up a payment plan, just a few thousand dollars more than what the school is paying in rent right now. The lenders will *iy”H* get their money back. It’s very practical and doable.”

Rabbi Wachsman is overwhelmed. “When I agreed to host a family for *Shabbos*, I had no idea how it would impact our school,” he reminisced from Chicago, where he was fundraising. “I’m meeting with people here about the school, and as soon as I start talking, I see they know about the campaign.”

“It’s like the splitting of the sea. We were breaking our heads, running around, trying to raise awareness, and out of the blue, one of our guests comes up with this zany idea. Honestly, I didn’t think it would work, but I just figured, the *yeshuah* has to come from somewhere. Hashem runs the world His way.”

The response from across the country has been heartwarming. “We have been receiving donations from all over the globe, from a few dollars to ambassadors who are pledging forty thousand dollars in loans. Some people are doing both; lending money and giving a donation.”

One of the remarkable donations was pledged by the principal of a *kiruv* day school in Houston, Texas, who saw a press release about the campaign. Although he is struggling with his own fundraising goals, he was so moved with what was happening in Orlando that he sent a thousand dollar donation, along with his wishes for *hatzlochah*. “It is stories like this,” said Rabbi Schepansky, “that give us the strength to go on.”

One of the side benefits of this campaign is the response of the locals in Orlando. “When I tell our parent body what’s going on, they can’t believe it,” said Rabbi Wachsman. “They can’t believe that perfect strangers who never met us are ready to go to bat and lend us the money for a building. That’s what one Jew does for another Jew. It’s tremendous.”

The real miracle, of course, is how Orlando Torah Academy is impacting the budding community.

“Our children come home with *Shabbos* candles for their mothers to light, and teach their fathers how to make *kiddush*,” the principal concludes. “They are asking their parents for *tzitzis* and giving them instructions on how to keep *Shabbos*. We see miracles every single day.”