

Dirshu: The Quiet Revolution

An Exclusive, Behind-The-Scenes Look At The Movement And The Man Behind It

What started as a single daf yomi shiur 18 years ago has grown into a worldwide movement of Torah learning and hasmada. Likely you or someone you know already participates in Dirshu. You may even be familiar with some of its history. But for most people, the real story of Dirshu and its founder and nasi, Rav Dovid Hofstedter, remains a mystery that is heightened by its very popularity.

After intensive efforts, Zman was able to meet with Rav Hofstedter himself. We are proud to share with our readers this intimate and wide-ranging conversation, unveiling new details about the Torah phenomenon he sparked and his own personal history.

- Moshe Holender



Somewhere within a high-rise office building in Toronto, the CEO of a multi-million-dollar corporation was discussing the future of his most important endeavor, a nonprofit organization he had founded. He had just implemented a wide-ranging project and the resources of the organization were being taxed to their very limits.

"This is completely overwhelming," his assistant said to him. "I think this is going to be our last initiative. I can't imagine starting any further programs."

"It certainly seems that way, at least for the time being," agreed the organization's founder.

"I think we should send out a press release," continued the assistant, "explaining that this is our final initiative. This last program rounds out our mission."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea..." his boss replied.

Ten Years Later...

We are finally sitting in a sparse room where our long-anticipated interview will take place. The only decoration is a portrait-sized, simply framed photograph hanging on the wall showing the Dirshu Daf HaYomi Siyum in 2012, which filled the Yad Eliyahu Stadium in Tel Aviv beyond capacity. Sitting across the desk, borrowed from the Director for Dirshu North America, is Rav Dovid Hofstedter, Dirshu's *nasi* and founder.

We are unsure of what to expect. Although Rav Hofstedter works tirelessly in the public realm on behalf of Dirshu, he is not one given to interviews. Still, after months of urging and advocating our case, he relented and agreed to grant *Zman* an exclusive interview, "for the sake of Dirshu."

His down-to-earth, unassuming manner soon puts us at ease. Although Rav Dovid is by nature a very private man, he is a great communicator and

someone who is very easy to talk to. He also has a fascinating story to tell.

We are now in the month of Elul. It is a time of introspection, *teshuvah* and spiritual rejuvenation through a closer connection to *Hashem*. During this special period of "*Dirshu Hashem b'himatzo*" (Yeshaya 55:6)—seek *Hashem* when He can be found—when spiritual growth is closer within our reach than during the rest of the year, many people make *kabbalos* (resolutions) to strengthen their *avodas Hashem*. That, in turn, brings to mind another "*dirshu*": "*Dirshu Hashem v'uzo*" (Tehillim 101:2)—seek Hashem and His might, which refers to His Torah.

For thousands of Torah Jews around the world, one of the most significant *kabbalos* they have made in their lives has been to undertake regular learning according to a set schedule with review and tests to measure their accomplishments—a true *kevi'us ittim leTorah*, facilitated by the Dirshu organization.

In the early days it seemed as if Dirshu's program might remain limited in its impact. Today, though—18 years after its founding—it has truly become a phenomenon. The number of people benefiting from Dirshu's many programs and acclaimed, groundbreaking *sefarim* must be counted not in the thousands, but the hundreds of thousands! As Dirshu grows and spreads across the globe, Torah learners on six continents are gaining a mastery of *halachah* and *gemara* that they never thought possible. All of a sudden, people with busy schedules are finding time they didn't realize they had for reviewing their learning.

The Dirshu organization, with its dedicated staff, has put this powerful system for learning, understanding and retaining a large volume of material—whether it be *gemara* or *halachah*—within everyone's reach. But the entire program, with its tests, groundbreaking *sefarim* and stipends for good scores, is the brainchild of one man: Rav Dovid Hofstedter.

Since Dirshu's inception in 1997, he



Zman correspondent Moshe Holender meets with Rav Dovid Hofstedter in the Dirshu North America office in Lakewood. During the meeting Dirshu stipend checks came in for Rav Dovid to sign; he signs every one personally. "It's how I keep in touch," he told us.

has enthralled attendees of his *shi'urim* in *gemara* and *halachah*. With the release of his acclaimed *sefarim* on *Chumash*, *Dorash Dovid*, the *tzibbur* at large also came to appreciate the depth and breadth of his Torah learning. We know that our readers have very much appreciated his contributions of *divrei Torah* for special *Zman* editions, such as expanded *Yom Tov* editions.

Still, one thing has remained an enigma to most people: Rav Dovid himself. Who is this man? What is his background, and how did he come to be the person who ignited a revolution in the way that Torah is learned by hundreds of thousands of Jews?

It is generally known that this adept *talmid chacham* is a member of the Hofstedter family of Toronto that controls a group of real estate corporations valued in the billions. It is also no secret that he arranges all of Dirshu's funding himself. This, too, leaves many unanswered questions. Why does it work that way? How much does Dirshu cost, and where does the money really come from?

We knew that it would be impossible to tell the real story of Dirshu without also unearthing as much as we could about its humble and intensely private founder. Our challenge was convincing Rav Dovid of that.... He is very reluctant to discuss his personal accomplishments.

So many people in the world of Torah testify that the Dirshu programs have

literally changed their lives. It's also changing their families and even their marriages for the better. When we casually mentioned to acquaintances that *Zman* was preparing an article about Dirshu, we were unprepared for the enthusiastic responses. "Dirshu? They saved my life!" was not a reaction we expected to hear even once, let alone numerous times. We began hearing about how children gained a new respect for "Abba" when they saw his dedication to learning. Wives spoke of the whole atmosphere of the home being rejuvenated.

It was then that we realized: This is a story that must be told.

Zman persistently submitted requests to Dirshu for a meeting with Rav Dovid. Fortunately, on a recent *erev Shabbos* we were granted the opportunity to sit down with him while he was on a short trip to Lakewood. As a result we had a delightfully intimate conversation and gained an unprecedented window into his personal history and how he, and Dirshu, got where they are today.

The Dirshu Revolution

The Yad Eliyahu Stadium in Tel Aviv teemed with energy as more than 10,000 Jews from all walks of life—and every segment of *klal Yisrael*—buzzed with excitement, gathered together here for