

החשבון **Mishpacha** FAMILY WEEKLY

YECHIEL BEN ZION "BENNY" FISHOFF

**Gerrer chassid, philanthropist,
composer, and collector
all wrapped in one package,
marked MENTSCH**

MADE IN CHINA

**A frightening look
behind the Bamboo Curtain**

DOES YOUR CHILD NEED GLASSES?

How To Tell



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We left Israel on the day of the cease-fire, leaving the war behind us, and flew to Switzerland. From the airport, we were driven on a very winding road through breathtaking scenery of snowcapped Alps, the very mountains we'd flown over only hours earlier. When it seemed as if the road could go no further, we came to our destination: an isolated campground nestled in a valley, surrounded on all sides by mighty peaks. There we met Rabbi Avraham Novick, rosh yeshivah of Homeward Bound, an innovative new yeshivah for English-speaking boys—and found ourselves on the battlefield of an even greater war.

For over a decade, Rabbi Novick has been helping troubled teens. Using a combination of heart-rousing Torah; one-on-one counseling and group therapy; wilderness survival; and sports programs, he has met with unusual success. He speaks with a raw energy, conviction, and sincerity that causes the most stubborn walls to crumble. He challenges his students to

take an honest look at themselves and the world, in ways that they've never done before. His non-threatening, down-to-earth approach reaches those who have never before been open to listening.

At Homeward Bound, we see *bochurim* with ADHD—who have been expelled from one school after another for the crime of being unable to sit through a class lesson—sit captivated while Rabbi Novick speaks for over an hour. He tells us his secret: he always starts with a story from his past, something to which they can relate. Having gone through a spiritual journey of his own, Rabbi Novick calls on his many different experiences to help him connect with his *talmidim*. "I've been wherever they want to go. They can't tell me that I can't understand them because I haven't been there. *I have.*" Ninety percent of the 200 boys who have taken part in the program have made serious life improvements on all levels.

Following the counsel of his spiritual mentor, the Biala Rebbe, Rav of Lugano, *shlita*, Rabbi Novick has run a summer wilderness camp in Switzerland, for the past five years. Last year, seeing the great success of the program, the Rebbe urged

the Novicks to leave Eretz Yisrael, their home of twenty years, and move to Switzerland permanently to open up the yeshivah high school. "It's not for me, not for him, but for *klal Yisrael* that these boys should have a place to go," Rabbi Novick explains. Students enjoy the beauty of the Alps while simultaneously earning a high school diploma.

Rabbi Novick describes the Homeward Bound program, which also has the approbation of Rav Mattisyahu Salomon and Rav Shmuel Berenbaum, as "a yeshivah high school in a therapeutic environment." Students all come from *shomer Shabbos* homes, from backgrounds across the Orthodox spectrum. For one reason or another, they didn't fit into "the system."

Many of the *bochurim* speak of past trauma, anything from social awkwardness or learning difficulties to family issues. Even one angry word from a



Back on the
BEATEN PA

teacher could have pushed a child into a downward spiral. Rabbi Novick describes his *talmidim* as mostly of above average intelligence and highly sensitive. "They're all good normal kids who have had difficult experiences." After speaking privately with each of the *bochurim* one summer, the Biala Rebbe exclaimed, "There's not a bad boy among them!"

How does Homeward Bound work? Rabbi Novick explains that there are three main aspects to the program: the emotional or therapeutic side, the spiritual, and the physical. "If you have my phone number, it means there's an issue that needs some sort of therapeutic adjustment." Any sort of rebellious, aberrant, or self-destructive behavior stems from a deeper-rooted emotional issue.

But before addressing the issues, the boys first have to start to feel good about themselves. For this reason, at the Biala Rebbe's suggestion, Rabbi Novick requires all the boys to exercise at least one hour a day—often much more—skiing, snowboarding, working out, or hiking in the Alps; the summer camp spends six weeks camping, hiking, whitewater rafting, and hang gliding.

"In order to feel good about yourself, you have to get out and do things," Rabbi Novick explains. "*Asher bara Elokim la'asos*. Hashem created the world to do things in. These kids sit around and do nothing; there's no question why they're unhappy. Get them to do sports, and depression decreases automatically. Medical science and psychology prove that. The chemicals in the brain rebalance. After they start feeling good, then you can work with them. If they don't feel good about themselves, you can't begin to talk to them about Yiddishkeit. At night, in the high school, I could tell who went snowboarding that day, by the attention span in my class and the level of *simchah*."

A major problem is that many of these boys have been declared hopeless by their parents and their communities, and they, too, have begun to believe that evaluation. Often they're reacting to a strong emphasis on academic success and their inability to live up to those external pressures. "Most kids come in with *yeush*, they come hopeless. If a kid gives up hope, it's all over. The first thing we show them is that they don't have to give up. They can be winners; they can succeed. For a boy who thought it was

all over to believe again that he can win—that's success. When they arrive in Switzerland, away from parents, school, friends, community, away from all the pressures, they let out a big sigh. It's like a balloon being released."

Hours after our arrival, the boys return from the day's hike. They're running down the mountainside, ecstatic after having hiked for twelve hours through both heat and snow. These are boys who just a few weeks earlier, were totally lethargic, and considered complete failures. For the first time in years, they feel successful and happy.

As the students start to see that the Rabbi and staff truly care about them, a trusting relationship begins to build. "Once they believe that you can help them succeed," Rabbi Novick explains, "the biggest fear is losing that potential. The worst consequence if they break the rules is that they'll lose the relationship with the rabbi and their chance to make a life for themselves. That's similar to *yiras HaRomemus*, fear of losing one's connection with Hashem. Once they believe that somebody cares about them and will take care of them, they're willing to do almost anything to get help." ►►



photos: Nafiali Goldberg

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the boys gather around while Rabbi Novick gives a stimulating rabbi lecture in the wilderness.

WALKING WITH THE REBBE

We had the tremendous *zchus* to speak for a few minutes with the Biala Rebbe in his home in Lugano. Once a sizable community, Lugano has dwindled over the years. But it has a kosher hotel, grocery store, and a beautiful shul with daily minyanim. The Rebbe was instrumental in the establishment of Homeward Bound. He feels that the mitzvah of *kiruv kerovim* is the biggest mitzvah of the generation. He spends time at the high school, with each of the *bochurim* individually. Last year, he and the Rebbeztin spent two weeks living in the dorm!

One of the students refused to leave Switzerland after graduation without seeing the Rebbe one more time. He traveled five hours by train to the picturesque lakeside town of Lugano, where the Rebbe has been *rav* for over twenty years. He was hoping for a few moments with the Rebbe.

The Rebbe dropped everything to take a walk with him. He told him that going home wouldn't be easy, but, "When an army is having a hard time, they don't try to escape by ignoring the problem and giving into temptation—they fight!" The bochur went home with a little more self-confidence for the battle ahead.

Why do you feel that Homeward Bound has been so successful?

"They put a lot of work into the boys. And the place itself takes them away from their friends who have had a bad influence on them. Human nature is that it's difficult to change when you're in the same place. When they change their place, they see the mountains, the fresh air,—it makes it easier to change."

What can *klal Yisrael* do to help prevent this problem that's afflicting us today?

"Parents shouldn't pressure their children or get annoyed at them. Rather, be *m'karev* them. Don't say, 'You're a bad boy; you can't do anything!' It's not always the fault of the children. Learn just a little with the boys, not forcibly. In Yiddishkeit you don't force. Have them do exercise. First make that sure they're happy and satisfied. When somebody is unhappy, you cannot have an influence on him; everything will go in and out. He has to be happy. The exercise will help to make him feel satisfied and fulfilled.

"Here at the high school, no one puts pressure on them. They become happy and they take things on slowly; first Shabbos, tefillin, and kashrus. But if you start pressing them with religion, especially nowadays, it just pushes them away. It keeps up the vicious cycle and it pushes boys out.

"In this generation, the main thing is that people are trying to make life easy. Telephones, cars... You don't even have to leave your house to go to work anymore. This generation is used to the easy life. When you learn Torah, you have to work hard and put in effort. Therefore, if they don't see results straight away, they don't want it. Here a boy finds his place. One must not be *meya'aish*, not give up hope on these boys. Never be *meya'aish* of a Jew. We see with our own eyes, our history is full of examples of *baalei teshuvah* like Rebbe Akiva; *baalei aveiros*, people with many sins, who became *tzaddikim*.

"Chassidus teaches us not to look down on a Jew. The Baal Shem Tov said that you should strive to love the biggest *tzaddik* like Hashem loves the biggest *rasha*. You have to love him and be *m'karev* him. It's not always his fault. If you had been in his surrounding, who knows what you would have been? Every Jew can become a good Yid.

"*Klal Yisrael* is made up of individuals; when you change individuals, you change the *klal*. The Gemara says that one who saves a single Jewish soul is as if he sustained an entire world. Every Jew is a world."



Boys involved in a Wilderness exercise during the week focused on strengthening the five senses.

The key is in the personal relationship. Therefore, student-to-staff ratio is almost two to one. Rabbi Novick meets with each of the boys at least twice a week, often at all hours of the night. Levi Kelman, the high school's administrator feels that the boys are really there for their relationship with Rabbi Novick: "The only reason they put up with all the work is because they know that he can help them. They see someone who has made it. They see his family, his kids, normal and happy. They see that this kind of life is possible. And he's consistent. He doesn't just preach, he lives it. These kids are used to hypocrisy; they have eagle eyes for it. As soon as they see inconsistency they have an excuse not to listen to you anymore."

Rabbi Novick says that he learned how to relate to his students from the Biala Rebbe's living example of understanding. He feels that it's a very special opportunity for his students to spend time with this *gadol b'Torah* and *talmid muvhak* of the Ponevezher Rav. "They hear his message and it's exactly what we tell them: 'Be happy with yourself, do sports, go step by



In Homeward Bound, we don't necessarily always deal with what the exact therapeutic problem is. What we deal with is why Hashem gave us problems. They call them problems; psychology calls them challenges. We show them in Jewish spirituality that these are our gifts."

At a *melaveh malkah* in Los Angeles a few years ago, Rabbi Novick was asked how parents could get their children to keep Shabbos. He answered that if the parents themselves could give him five reasons why their children should keep Shabbos, he would get them to keep it. "It's not a spiritual, exciting experience for them," he explained.

"They usually think that Shabbos is a day when you can't do anything. All they're looking for is *menuchas hanefesh*, peace of mind. Shabbos is exactly what they're looking for in the world, and they've been cheated.

"I challenge them that none of them are willing to experience true Shabbos. If they did, they'd be in trouble. Because once you experience a real Shabbos, you can't lie to yourself anymore; you have to experience yourself. As long as Hashem and Torah and mitzvos are true, than they can't escape themselves. That's why a religious kid's rebellion is so extreme—because he knows Torah is true and he has to get as far away as possible in order to escape the guilt.

"Therefore, we never try to convince a kid that the Torah is true. Because they know that already, so why do we have to convince him? Just let it out and experience it. We challenge them that they're afraid to do so because ultimately they're afraid of themselves: 'What if it's true? Then I'm stuck. Then I have to keep it.' Then there's no excuse anymore and they have to be who they really are."

In communities where academic success is the sole emphasis, a child who cannot meet expectations has a very big risk of going off the *derech*. "We teach our students that learning Torah is the highest level of serving Hashem, but the goal is to be serving Hashem in *everything that we do*. The Chassidic concepts electrify them. They've never heard them before."

During the course of the program, around seventy-five percent of the stu-

dents start keeping Shabbos, on their own. "It's a very powerful thing. We'd rather see them keep Shabbos, tefillin, and kashrus *b'ratzon*, from their own free choice, than just doing everything by rote. After about five weeks, they come and say, 'Rabbi, we know everything that you're saying is true. It's just a matter of if we want to do the work now.' So it's a very different approach, which is why we don't require anything. Let them come to it on their own. There's no rush. You have to be very patient."

What do you consider a success?

"Success is a very strange word, because who's labeling what success means? As one of the big therapists in Israel said, 'Just not saying no at being asked to clean up after themselves is success.' As long as a fifteen-year-old who's started downsliding doesn't keep falling and stays stable, that's called success. If he goes up, that's a miracle. The goal is to make these boys into *mentchen*, so that they can get married and raise healthy children. The only way we can change the problem in *klal Yisrael* is if they come out of here knowing how to care about others and put the needs of others before their own. We don't talk about keeping Shabbos versus not keeping it. Rather, we talk about selflessness versus selfishness, honesty versus *sheker*, openness versus manipulation."

In the high school, success is measured with a chart: improved self-esteem/self respect; relationship with parents; relationship with Hashem; academic improvement; openness to Torah; taking on of mitzvos; staying away from self-destructive behaviors. All of the students improved in most of the categories.

Rabbi Novick tells his *talmidim* that the prerequisites for the high school are a commitment to truth, whatever that means to each person, and a willingness to do the work. "You need a willingness to deal with your own issues; we don't run away here. The only thing we push is personal responsibility. They're pushed to confront themselves and stop blaming others for their problems. As the Baal Shem Tov says, 'If you have to blame ►►

step with your Yiddishkeit.' He gives them inspiration and he accepts them. They see that he's a *gadol* and that he's also real. They can't believe that he's not a *baal teshuvah*, because he understands them. The reason he understands them is because he's not judgmental and he accepts them for who they are. The greatest thing about the Baal Shem Tov was that he could put himself at the level of the simplest Jews. The Rebbe embodies this."

Rabbi Novick's teachings are largely taken from the Ramchal's *Derech Hashem*, intertwined with Chassidic thought to stress its practical application. Several years ago he visited a prominent day school in the United States and was asked to speak to each of the classes. When the bell would ring, nobody left. He was asked to come back and teach a *shiur* with optional attendance. The room was overfilled. Everyone came. "Why?" he asks. "Because I was teaching little bits of spirituality: 'What is free choice? Why did Hashem create the world? If He created the world to do good, why do we all suffer?' These kids are thirsty for spirituality.



Receiving the days hiking logistics after spending a night camping by a chalet.

“Another vital thing we can do for our children is to make sure that we’re living lives of meaning and purpose and that we’re truly happy with who we are”

someone, blame yourself. If you have to praise someone, praise Hashem.’ You have to be responsible for your life. Whatever happened to you in the past is over and done. Let’s get on with life today: do you want to be a *mentch* or not? We’ll show you how to succeed, but *you* have to do the work; nobody’s going to do the fighting for you.

“Every action has a consequence, either positive or negative. In the spiritual realm, it also has consequences for everybody in the whole world. We teach them to wake up, and be conscious. Don’t be asleep. Be conscious of your fellow Jew, yourself, your speech, your actions—everything we do effects the entire universe. The positive consequence is that they’re getting to snowboard and ski in the beautiful Swiss Alps, while getting a high school education, learning about themselves and life, and overcoming their fears and issues. What better reward? The best reward is being happy with yourself. *Sipuk*, satisfaction, is directly related to *hishtadlus*, effort. The greatest gift is yourself.”

The *bochurim* are asked if they would rather live an easy life without knowing if what they’re doing is right or a hard life full of struggles and suffering while knowing completely that they’re doing the right thing. Most choose the second option because, as Rabbi Novick explains, “If we know that what we’re doing is right, there is *no suffering*. Some of the boys say, ‘We’d rather have the first choice now, and the second one next year!’ It’s just a matter of time.”

What can parents do to help prevent children from going off the *derech*?

“Be sensitive to each child’s needs. And make the child’s spiritual and emotional health the most important priority

in our lives, as opposed to success, image, etc. Self esteem has to be taught. Most people think that self esteem is something that you’re born with and then people mess it up. On the contrary, no one has self-esteem unless they learn it from a significant other.

“We often get caught up with the symptoms of our children’s rebellion and not the problem. Our children are rebelling and doing harmful things because those things help them to escape from their pain. We have to change our perspective. What we see as the problem is what *they* see as the solution. We need to address the underlying cause of their pain and show them that we’re going to support them through it.

“If a child is diagnosed with ADHD or other learning disability, one family may respond with negativity: ‘Oh no, another thing to worry about! Now we have to hire a special tutor, and how are we going to pay the bills? Now you’ll never be the best.’ Such a response only pushes the child further away. Another family will say: ‘We’re going to get through this together. We are a group project.’ A number of kids were placed in public schools, simply because they didn’t fit into the system. Parents need to know that there is a place for their children that will give them a ‘holistic’ education and address them for who they are.

“Another vital thing we can do for our children is to make sure that we’re living lives of meaning and purpose and that we’re truly happy with who we are.”

A sixteen-year-old from Israel who just finished his first year in the high school and stayed on for the summer camp describes his experience at Home-ward Bound: “Kids have really repressed their issues—their anger, their resentment—pretty far back, and don’t even remember some of it. Rabbi Novick has dealt with so many kids that even if you have trouble remembering things about yourself, he can usually tell what it is. There are a lot of things that people are scared to tell him, but he’s open with everything.

“I don’t think people understand what open really means. You could have come to the school just as an excuse to get out of other things, and not do the work—and you’ll still pick up things about yourself. I really did learn a lot about myself. Sometimes it’s stuff you don’t even want to hear, but you have to hear it. It’s hard at the beginning, but you know it’s true. And it helps you to understand why you function differently from other people. And you never feel guilty when you talk to him. It’s more than acceptance; it’s understanding.” ■