

A FIRE IN HIS SOUL

by Amos Bunim



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Chapter Eleven

The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School



אם כל חי (בראשית ג:כ)

...the mother of all living (Bereishis 3:20)

IRVING BUNIM'S relationship to the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School was deep and long-standing. The enormous dedication he displayed towards the school was like that of a parent for his child.

In truth, it was RJJ that had given birth to him. In its halls, Bunim the immigrant boy received the Torah education that shaped his extraordinary life of service. Not surprisingly, when asked to be RJJ's president in 1940, Bunim accepted. For over thirty-five years he served in that capacity, repaying his debt of gratitude many times over.

In those years, RJJ was known as the Mother Yeshiva and was a dominant force in molding and shaping Torah in America, raising the level of Torah learning and observance among thousands of Jewish families.

Founded in 1900, RJJ is the oldest continuously operating day school in America. Although it had predecessors, they either closed or merged with other institutions. Yeshiva Etz Chaim, for example, was founded in 1886 and twenty-nine years later joined Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (later Yeshiva University), retaining its high school, but dropping the elementary division.¹

Although there were hundreds of thousands of European Jews dwelling in New York at the turn of the century, there were few

opportunities for organized and authentic Torah learning, especially for children. Rabbi Jacob Joseph, who had immigrated to New York in 1885 to assume the post of chief rabbi, had hoped to establish a yeshiva, but his efforts did not reach fruition.

The growing trend toward acculturation and assimilation continued virtually unchecked until one man founded a Torah school. Rabbi Shmuel Yitzchak Andron, a noted *talmid chacham* and linguist from Dvinsk, first called the school Yeshiva Tifereth Jerusalem (unrelated to Rabbi Moshe Feinstein's yeshiva which was founded later and bore the same name). Within two years he changed the name as a memorial to Rabbi Jacob Joseph, his close friend, who had recently died.

Though Rabbi Andron had a comfortable position in Europe, he feared that his five sons would be affected by the deteriorating political conditions there and by army conscription. Like many, he came to seek a haven in America, only to find it hostile to Torah life. Although ordained by the renowned Rabbi Meir Simcha HaKohen, Rabbi Andron eked out a living as a Hebrew teacher. Frustrated that his students could only study for two hours a day, he left teaching to become an independent insurance agent. Finding no suitable yeshiva for his sons, he sent them to public school and taught them Torah himself.²

This difficult situation continued until two remarkable events coincided, changing the course of Torah education in America. The first was a speech given by Rabbi Yaakov David ben Zev (the *Ridbaz*), the Slutsker Rav, in the Lower East Side's noted Pike Street *Shul*. "A *mitzva*," he said, quoting *Proverbs*, "is like a candle, yet the Torah is compared to a torch."³ Both are alike because they bring light to a dark room. Yet, while a strong wind can easily extinguish a candle, it will make the torch grow even stronger so that its light will spread over a large area. So it is with Torah education. Unless there are yeshivos to propagate Torah in America, *Yiddishkeit* will be buffeted by the strong winds of secularism and will disappear altogether."⁴

This fiery speech burned in Jewish hearts for days, in none more strongly than Rabbi Andron's. Yet he did nothing until a second incident compelled him to act. His son Feivish came home from school soon after the Slutsker Rav's speech and asked for permission to attend a Christmas party. Rabbi Andron immediately withdrew

his son from school and convinced several of his clients to do the same. With only ten boys, he launched his own school, paying salaries out of his own pocket. It was modest enough at the outset: a rented room in a Hester Street *shul*, a Hebrew teacher from 9:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M., and a teacher of secular subjects from 4:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. Rabbi Andron supervised all school activities, from interviewing the teachers to inviting all the students to his home on Shabbos so he could monitor their progress.

Rabbi Andron's business suffered as he put more time into the school. Simultaneously, however, his school flourished, although the concept of an all-day yeshiva was revolutionary at the time. With the help of Rabbi Hirsh Green (a *shochet*, a student of Rabbi Jacob Joseph and a member of his *beis din*) and two of Rabbi Andron's older sons, the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School expanded into a two-story building on Orchard Street.

By 1907, RJJ was so successful that it moved to its own building at 156-165 Henry Street, where it remained for nearly seventy years. By 1910, it had five hundred students, a substantial number considering the school's Lithuanian method of intense Torah study and the development of other Torah institutions with differing philosophies.⁵ Yeshiva Rabbi Shlomo Kluger of the Lower East Side catered primarily to *Chassidim*. In 1917, Rabbi Zev Gold opened Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, also with a more Chassidic orientation, in Williamsburg. At one time, too, there was talk of a merger between RJJ and Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, which was never accomplished. Nevertheless, RJJ reigned as the major yeshiva on the Lower East Side, including the three Bunimowitz boys among many other students. Irving Bunim entered RJJ virtually upon his arrival in the United States, and remained there until his elementary school graduation in 1915.

In those early years, a man named Julius J. Dukas shaped RJJ and, ultimately, Bunim's life-long commitment to Torah institutions. Born in 1869 of German-Jewish parents, Dukas was a businessman and philanthropist. He supported the Zichron Ephraim Synagogue (also known as the Orach Chaim and Park East Synagogue), the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, the Hebrew Free Loan Society, the Central Relief Committee (the Orthodox wing of the original Joint Distribution Committee), the short-lived Teachers' Training Academy and RJJ.

From 1913 until his death in 1940, Dukas served as RJJ's president. Every Sunday, Dukas went out to solicit funds, regardless of the weather. Once, during a substantial downpour, a friend asked him why he ventured out in such weather. "I purposely go out in the rain," Dukas smiled. "It impresses people and they donate more money." In the course of his relationship with RJJ, Dukas convinced many laymen to become active supporters.⁶

Dukas used a substantial amount of the funds he collected to support a group of indigent students known as "Dukas's boys." Not only did he pay for their tuition, he saw to it that they were properly clothed and housed. He also made sure they received extra money and a new suit for the holidays. Some of the boys lived in a dormitory, a small apartment house on East 69th Street, where they followed a strict and closely supervised regimen. Attendance in *shul* for *shacharis*, *minchah* and *ma'ariv* (morning, afternoon and evening prayers) was mandatory. The boys ate their meals in the dormitory dining room, spent Shabbos there and returned to their homes for only a few hours on Sunday.⁷

These *talmidim* were so grateful to Dukas for the education and care he lavished on them that, long after his death, they continued to hold reunions and donate funds to RJJ. Some included bequests to RJJ in their wills. Even today, it is not uncommon for the Yeshiva to receive substantial contributions from the estates of alumni. One group of Dukas's boys, including Dr. William Brickman, Harry Pilchick and Emanuel Reich remained active members of the board of directors.

Bunim maintained a link with RJJ after his graduation in 1915 by becoming a member of the alumni organization. But it was not until the late 1930s that Dukas asked him to play a major role in saving RJJ. During the Depression, the school had suffered badly from dwindling funds and faltering leadership. At one point, with attendance falling dramatically and with low staff morale, the Yeshiva nearly went bankrupt. A distraught Dukas complained to Avraham Meyers, a friend and a charter member of RJJ, that he was getting too old to shoulder the burden. Meyers suggested that they tap the alumni.

"Fine," Dukas countered, "That's a good idea, but where do we start?"

Meyers thought for a moment, then said, "Why don't you take

Irving Bunim? He is a very smart boy.”⁸

Dukas approached Bunim who, despite his substantial involvement with Young Israel, agreed to help. First, Bunim worked to strengthen the school's financial and educational foundations. He actively sought greater contributions from his many contacts and fellow alumni. He also helped RJJ expand into a high school and *beis ha-midrash*, to raise its standards of Torah learning and to retain Lithuanian-style *talmidei chachamim*.⁹ (One appointee, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, later founded and became *Rosh Yeshiva* of Yeshiva and Mesivta Chaim Berlin.)¹⁰

Bunim received unwavering support from Rabbi Dr. Hillel Weiss, the Hebrew principal Dukas had retained in 1939. A refugee from near Vienna, Rabbi Weiss was a dignified and learned Austrian Jew who brought new standards of scholarship and conduct to RJJ. He loved Torah and those who studied it, and people felt that love and respected him for it. Rabbi Weiss wanted RJJ to expand, to include a high school fostering *litvishe lomdus* (the demanding Lithuanian style of Torah study). Together, the two men fought for their goals, often against their own board of directors, who did not have Bunim's Torah perspective and who favored a more secular approach. Bunim and Rabbi Weiss worked together to bring RJJ to its greatest glory.

Bunim solidified RJJ's financial base, adding to its core of lay leaders the sons and grandsons of Orthodox philanthropists. One was Lazarus Joseph, Comptroller of New York City and the grandson of the late Chief Rabbi; another was Harry Golding, son of Joseph Golding of Golding Textiles. Bunim's task was difficult, for although many of their fathers were strictly observant and committed to Torah education, the sons often were not. They shared their forebears' commitment to RJJ but differed substantially with Bunim and Rabbi Weiss about the degree of Torah study that should be in the curriculum. Bunim had to oppose the view of individuals who were of his generation, many of whom were not *shomer Shabbos* (Shabbos-observant), or were committed to left-wing observance and secularism.

Bunim was virtually alone among the lay leaders in his efforts for more intensive Torah study at RJJ, though in many instances he was assisted by Benjamin Koenigsberg. As such, Bunim was often trapped between two opposing camps: the school's *talmidei chacha-*

mim whom he supported, and the liberal board whose support he needed. The rabbinic faculty felt that RJJ's *raison d'être* was Torah education; the board felt secular education was the school's primary function. As one man remembered it, "For Bunim there was constant heartache, pain, frustration and anguish. Yet he was the kind of man who fought to the end. Eventually he won."¹¹

Throughout this period of growth, RJJ maintained the tradition begun by Dukas of addressing all the needs of its students. It gave each boy more than just an education, and continued the practice of giving food and clothing to the needy. Under the sponsorship and guidance of Dora Golding (Joseph Golding's wife), RJJ opened a Torah camp in Deal, New Jersey, for those boys who could not afford the luxury of a summer vacation.

A man named Joseph Appelbaum — himself not Orthodox, but from an observant home — personified the *mitzva* of *gemilas chesed*. He used RJJ as a central distribution point, handing out kosher-for-Passover food packages, including eight days' worth of wine, *matzos*, chicken and more, to the poor of the Lower East Side. The food distribution, which benefited many school families, was supervised by *Rebbetzin* Bella Tendler. Her husband, Rabbi Isaac Tendler, had a great influence on Appelbaum, imbuing him with love for Torah-true *Yiddishkeit*. Rabbi Tendler implanted such a depth of feeling in Appelbaum that he remained a major philanthropist for Torah institutions generally, and RJJ in particular. To commemorate his parents' *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death), Appelbaum said *kaddish* in Rabbi Tendler's synagogue. That was where his father had prayed, and Appelbaum felt that his parents deserved that mark of respect. To honor his fellow-director of RJJ, Bunim was always present on those days, bringing a fine bottle of Scotch to commemorate the occasion.¹²

Bunim believed that RJJ could maintain its standard of excellence in both Torah and secular education, and so it did. For more than thirty years, from 1940 to 1970, RJJ was one of the outstanding yeshivos of New York City.

RJJ was particularly fortunate in that all of its *roshei yeshiva* were unusually fine *talmidei chachamim*, *gedolim ba-Torah* (great Torah sages) and overall members of the Torah aristocracy. The *Roshei Yeshiva* were also outstanding pedagogues and *rebbeim* who molded and shaped a significant number of very loyal *talmidim*.

They were Rabbi Yehuda Leib Kagan, Rabbi Joseph Nevenansky, Rabbi Shaya Shiminowitz, and Rabbi Isaac Tendler. Rabbi Zeidel Epstein, known for his outstanding *musar shmuessen*, and Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Warshavchik had a great influence on the students' development. Both influenced many *talmidim* to continue their Torah studies at Beth Medrash Govoha (in Lakewood.)¹³

The *Roshei Yeshiva* infused the school with a *litvishe musardicke ruach* (spirit of Lithuanian ethics instruction), giving it the flavor of a European yeshiva in microcosm.

Among the students there were local boys from the Lower East Side, many from non-religious homes, and others from observant homes, who were bused in from all over the metropolitan area. Many continued learning after graduation at advanced yeshivos, including Torah Vodaath and Telshe. Due to its close relationship with Rabbi Aaron Kotler, RJJ served for almost two decades as a major feeder institution for Beth Medrash Govoha, with roughly half the best Lakewood students coming from RJJ. "RJJ was a yeshiva," one man recalls, "with an award-winning scholastic newspaper, a basketball team, and serious Torah learning. It was a strange combination; imagine the dichotomy."

That dichotomy led to many battles. A major one revolved around the school auditorium. In the early 1950s, all the high school classes went to the *beis midrash* after the 11:00 A.M. recess to learn together for thirty minutes before attending their regular *shiurim*. The rabbis felt cramped there and wanted to turn the auditorium into a *beis midrash*. Most of the *ba'alei batim* (lay leaders) on the board objected, preferring to leave things as they were. Yet with Bunim's help and Rabbi Weiss' direction, the auditorium was eventually made into the *beis midrash*, complete with an *aron kodesh*.

Often, the *rebbeim* had to take it upon themselves to augment Torah study. Rabbi Warshavchik instituted a night *seder* (study session) without asking the board's permission. One night, a local delinquent saw the lights on in the school and broke a window. When the board heard about the incident, they charged Rabbi Warshavchik with violating the RJJ school code; after all, the windows would not have been broken if Rabbi Warshavchik's students were not studying late at night. Bunim was so incensed that a *talmid chacham* with such lofty ideals could be so denigrated that he adjourned the board meeting, saying, "There is nothing to talk

about. The Rabbi is right.”

Torah was paramount, yet in many ways RJJ was a school like any other. There were basketball games in the new gym, which the *rebbeim* frowned on because RJJ often hosted teams whose boys did not wear yarmulkas when they played. There was a playground, too, named for Captain Jacob Joseph, the Chief Rabbi's great-grandson who was killed during World War II. There was recess in streets that the police cordoned off each day.

There was also night-time Torah learning, *mishmar* (the European-style, late-night Torah learning sessions, held every Thursday), and all-night Torah learning on *Shavuot* and *Hoshanah Rabbah* (the seventh day of the *Sukkos* festival).

Each *rebbe* had a distinctive personality and teaching style. One attracted the students' attention by ringing a bell. Another, an old-fashioned pedagogue, used his strength of character — along with his ruler — to keep order. To be sure, on occasion the boys played practical jokes: switching teachers' chairs, hiding, jumping and jostling. Still, the emphasis was on Torah. “We had tremendous fun in RJJ,” one alumnus recalls, “especially in high school. Yet the stress was on learning. When we graduated, we knew *Chumash*, we knew *lashon ha-kodesh* [Biblical Hebrew], we knew *Gemara* and *halachah* too. The *rebbeim* taught us well.”

At its height, RJJ had three buildings on the Lower East Side, a Hebrew faculty of forty and an enrollment of twelve hundred. Its program of studies ranged from kindergarten through the *semichah* program, in which Bunim played an important role.

RJJ boys looked up to Bunim. Every Sunday morning he gave lectures on public speaking at RJJ, which included *Midrash* and *Aggadah* (non-legal portions of the Talmud), later published in *Ever Since Sinai*.*

The students recognized Bunim's involvement in their lives. Once, as he was leaving the school, chewing on his ever-present cigar, a boy hesitantly approached him.

“Excuse me for bothering you, Mr. Bunim,” he stammered, “but we are having some trouble raising the money we need for our Purim party.”

* Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem/New York: 1977.

Bunim shot the boy a glance.

"The man in the office," the boy continued, "won't give us —"

"How much do you need?" Bunim interrupted, pressed for time.

"Well, I think we could use about ten dollars, but if that's —"

The boy stopped, for his benefactor had thrust a ten-dollar bill into his hand and was already moving away.

Bunim brought more than money to RJJ's students. He gave them sensitive leadership. When the revelry of *Simchas Torah* caused one boy to become quite ill, some board members questioned the legitimacy of such merrymaking. Bunim soothed the offended board members, spoke to the boy and his classmates, and reassured all concerned. "Mr. Bunim," one graduate fondly recalls, "knew how we felt."¹⁴

For thirty years, remembering the difficult times his father's students had faced during the Depression, Bunim never permitted any child to be rejected for lack of funds.

He was equally dedicated to the personal needs of RJJ's *rebbeim* and parents. Bunim frequently shared their business, personal and family problems. He never turned down any request, explaining that anyone associated with RJJ was a member of his family.

In the mid-1940s, RJJ's extended family was threatened. Shortly after Bunim became president, the New York State Board of Regents sought to revoke RJJ's accreditation (and that of Torah Vodaath, Tifereth Jerusalem, Crown Heights, Etz Chaim and roughly two dozen other yeshivos) unless secular studies were taught in the mornings. The Board of Regents held a hearing in Albany and invited yeshiva representatives to attend. Bunim made the trip, accompanied by attorney Louis Gribetz; Herbert Tenzer, then president of the Crown Heights Yeshiva; H.L. Zelig, head of the United Yeshivos Foundation; and many other rabbinic and lay leaders.¹⁵ They went with the blessing of Rabbi Kotler, who felt that failure to convince the Board of Regents to permit morning Torah studies would cause a *bechiyah l'doros* (lamenting for generations to come).¹⁶

As it turned out, the hearing took place on *Tisha B'Av*, a fast day commemorating, among other tragedies, the destruction of the First and Second Holy Temples. As *halachah* requires, Bunim and his colleagues were unshaven and wearing sneakers.¹⁷ When the Board's attorney Susan Brandeis, the daughter of Supreme Court

Justice Louis Brandeis, saw their unkempt appearance, she asked sharply, "Is this a way to come dressed to a Board of Regents hearing?"

The group was devastated by the remark. With great presence of mind, Tenzer jumped to his feet. "Mr. Chairman," he began, before anyone could interrupt him, "may I explain the reason for this? Today is the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 of the Common Era. It is a law for Orthodox Jews to mourn and fast on this day. These men and I," Tenzer gestured at his associates, "were at the synagogue praying at six this morning. We are not permitted to eat, drink, shave or wear leather shoes for a period of twenty-five hours. It is a tragic and trying day for us, but because of our respect for this Board we did not apply for a postponement. We want you to know how much we wanted to attend this hearing, and we also want you to know why we appear as we do."

The room was still for a moment. Then Owen Young, chairman of the Board of Regents and president of General Electric, said quietly, "Miss Brandeis, I think you owe these gentlemen an apology."

Tenzer's heartfelt presentation was the best possible introduction for his group's position, for prior to the hearing the Board of Regents had been hostile toward the yeshivos' cause. In fact, it did not intend to give the yeshivos a hearing, let alone grant an exemption from teaching secular subjects in the morning. However, Tenzer's remarks underscored his colleagues' integrity, and the members of the Board of Regents kept an open mind. For its part, the Board felt all parochial schools should offer secular subjects in the mornings. It maintained that students' minds were more alert then, and that secular studies were more important than religious subjects.

Bunim argued that teaching secular studies each morning would cause yeshivos undue hardship. They needed their Hebrew teachers to supervise and conduct morning services. If the students then proceeded to secular classes, the Hebrew teachers would have to be dismissed and brought back later in the day. "The cost," Tenzer said, "would be prohibitive. We would have to have a triple payroll."

Bunim offered statistics showing that despite years of secular studies in the afternoons, yeshiva students had collectively out-

scored their non-yeshiva peers in Regents examinations. Tenzer added, "The children at our yeshivos have a zest for knowledge; their minds are sharpened by studying Torah. The analytical training they receive each morning enables them to absorb knowledge throughout the day."

Duly weighing the evidence, the Board of Regents exempted the yeshivos from teaching secular subjects in the mornings.¹⁸

There were other victories. RJJ's dramatic growth after World War II led the school to establish a *beis midrash* (post-high school) program leading to ordination.¹⁹ In fact, Bunim introduced Rabbi Hillel Weiss to Rabbi Kotler. Rabbi Weiss had known of Rabbi Kotler's greatness for years, but meeting him surpassed all his expectations. Rabbi Weiss asked the *Gadol ha-Dor* if he would honor RJJ by giving occasional *Gemara shiurim* and *musar shmuessen*. Rabbi Kotler eagerly agreed and later helped place some of his former students, including Rabbi Mendel Kravitz, as RJJ *roshei yeshiva*.

Rabbi Kravitz was charged with building RJJ's *beis midrash* program in 1947. Initially, the board did not want the school to establish a division that could offer ordination. In fact, RJJ's constitution forbade it. But Bunim, again with Rabbi Kotler's support, fought for the program. He argued successfully that this radical shift in RJJ policy would help replace the fallen European Torah centers, while fostering Torah in America. "If Torah is to have any future at all on these shores," he said to his fellow board members, "it will have to grow from within."

Over the next twelve months the RJJ *beis midrash* sent thirty *talmidim* to the Lakewood Yeshiva for further Torah study. By 1952, the *beis midrash* had instituted a *semichah* program which produced *rabbanim* of the highest caliber. A particular group of *semichah* students performed so brilliantly on their oral exams that Rabbi Yoseph Eliyahu Henkin, the acknowledged *posek* of the age, stopped the exams, phoned Bunim and asked him to come over for some *nachas*. Although it was the middle of a working day, Bunim dropped everything to listen as his boys were tested. He could hardly conceal his joy as they answered question after question correctly, often with particular brilliance. Finally, when the exam was over, Rav Henkin told Bunim that the RJJ *talmidim* knew *hora'ah* (Torah direction and legal decisions) better than some average European rabbis.

"Now I know," Bunim beamed with delight, "that all my work for this Yeshiva — the effort and anguish — was worth it."

Bunim was justly proud of many of the RJJ graduates who contributed to science, medicine, government, law, academia and culture. The RJJ students regularly took top prizes in many fields. Most gratifying was a Talmud contest open to all yeshivos and sponsored by the Zeire Agudath Israel (the youth division of Agudath Israel). Bunim's greatest respect went to those RJJ prize-winners. He admired the Torah scholars who opted for rabbinic ordination as well as those who continued to learn in other Torah institutions. Indeed, he wrote of the first RJJ rabbinic ordination, "It was a happy day! The dream of half a century, the hope of all our predecessors in the administration of the Yeshiva, the fond wish of Chief Rabbi Jacob Joseph, becoming a reality on June 8, 1952."

Rabbi Jacob Joseph School

Founders

Rabbi Jacob L. Andron

Louis Rozman

Julius J. Dukas

Honorary Members of the Board

Mrs. Sarah Dukas

Mrs. Dora Golding

Philip Amin
Joseph Appelbaum
Samuel H. Bernstein
Dr. William Brickman
David Cohen
Malcolm Cohen
Israel Cummings
Jacob Demov
David Goldberg
William L. Goldberg
Joseph Golding
Harry W. Golding
Samuel H. Golding
Sidney Golding
Sam Goldstein
Abraham Gribetz
Louis J. Gribetz
Sam Horowitz
Philip Jablow

Israel Jacobs
Hon. Lazarus Joseph,
grandson of the Chief
Rabbi, Rabbi Jacob
Joseph, and Comptroller
of the City of New York

Benjamin Koenigsberg
Benjamin Kaufman
Arthur I. Le Vine
Nathan Levine
Isidor Mendelson
Samuel Ortner
Max Rosenberg
Louis Rozman
Simon Salwen
Aaron M. Schreiber
Irving Singer
Meyer Stavisky
Tobin S. Zwerdling

Unfortunately, Bunim and RJJ had numerous problems in the years to come. Demographic shifts in the 1960s and '70s put RJJ in jeopardy. As the Lower East Side's Hispanic and Oriental population grew, its Jewish population dwindled. Neighborhoods which once sent their youngsters to RJJ had built yeshivos of their own, and suburban parents were loathe to send their children to an urban school. The spiralling crime rate on the subways only made matters worse.²⁰

At first, it seemed RJJ would weather this storm and possibly prosper from it. As Puerto Rican immigrants settled in the Lower East Side, RJJ's enrollment rose dramatically. The neighborhood's poor and non-observant Jews, who had previously sent their children to public schools, suddenly wanted a Jewish alternative. Some board members tried to keep these children out, arguing that they were coming to RJJ only because of the Hispanic influx, and that their presence would cause the school to suffer an enormous deficit. Bunim fought to keep them in the Yeshiva and to waive their tuition payments. He constantly reminded the board that the *Gemara* warns us to treat the poor with sensitivity because Torah emanates from them.²¹ It was a painful battle, and he approached it with his characteristic mixture of charm and fire. "The Almighty," he told his fellow board members, "went to the trouble of sending immigrants from Puerto Rico in order to get these children into the Yeshiva. Do you want to fight with the Almighty? It is our obligation to take them in, and to raise the money to support them. Torah comes first!"

The campaign initially was successful, for Bunim had enormous power on the board due in part to his personal friendship with each board member. Bunim had shared both their joyous occasions and tragedies as if they were his own because he believed that the other board members were vital Torah supporters. These friendships were based on a sharing of accomplishments for Torah. Thus, despite all the political infighting, which at times caused everyone great pain, Bunim was greatly respected even by the most modern and secular-minded. Therefore, he was able to wield a high degree of influence.

In the long run, however, Bunim's efforts were in vain. Although he spent virtually every Sunday at RJJ, lecturing, agonizing over the school's finances, talking Torah with *rebbeim* and *talmidim*, nothing could stem the enormous changes undercutting RJJ's fiscal stability.

Bunim continued to battle the board to get higher salaries for the *rebbeim*, arguing that to build Torah to its highest level RJJ had to offer its Torah teachers a decent living.

To make matters worse, the more Torah-oriented families continued to send their children elsewhere, leaving a core of students who had little Torah background or interest, and therefore no real way to catch up to grade-level in their learning. These students' problems vexed Bunim greatly, for he feared that RJJ was their one chance. If they missed a thorough exposure to Torah as children they might be lost to *Yiddishkeit* forever. He suggested that they study the somewhat easier teachings of Rabbi Moses Maimonides (the Rambam) rather than the difficult *Gemara*, but the administration argued that this would severely lower RJJ's standard of excellence. Moreover, those children had little patience or ability to learn Talmud, and the school was increasingly unable to marshal the resources to combat the problem. In the end, all Bunim could do was watch helplessly as they were pushed to the back of the class, further away from Torah. Eventually some were indeed lost to *Yiddishkeit*.

Ultimately, Bunim and the board agreed — at least in theory — that to survive, RJJ might have to leave its home on the Lower East Side. In 1968, an attempt to relocate the school to Manhattan's West 56th Street failed. A few years later, a planned move to the Riverdale section of the Bronx fell through. As always, Bunim was intimately involved in these efforts, recommending locations, planning moves, even undertaking out-of-town fund-raising trips. Although nearing eighty, Bunim remained extraordinarily active, in the forefront of Torah leadership. Many said he was as mentally acute as a man half his age.

Somehow he never despaired of RJJ's future. Accordingly, he sought young, active leadership for his *alma mater*. Bunim relinquished the presidency in 1975, nominating one of RJJ's most distinguished alumni, Dr. Marvin Schick, to be his successor.

Dr. Schick, a professor at Hunter College, Special Assistant to the Mayor in John Lindsay's administration, and founder of COLPA (The National Jewish Commission on Law and Public Affairs), gladly accepted. His energy, combined with Bunim's experience, ensured that changes would be effected for the school's survival. Dr. Schick streamlined the administrative structure to reflect changing demographics. No longer was the New York Torah

community confined to one or two areas, and no longer was it necessary for children to commute to school. Accordingly, RJJ shifted from a city-wide Yeshiva to one that would build upon the strengths of particular communities. In 1976, the elementary school was moved to the young and growing Torah community on Staten Island.

Bunim's presence and support endowed the endeavor with a credibility it might not have had otherwise, for he was a palpable link to the school's great past. Neither he nor Dr. Schick faltered for a moment; in fact, Bunim worked up until the very last days of his life to reestablish the high school and *beis midrash* program, both of which had closed.²² Eventually they turned their sights to New Jersey, where by the late 1970s the Edison-Highland Park area had grown into a flourishing Torah community. Bunim and RJJ's new leadership considered it to be an ideal location for the high school and post-graduate *beis midrash*. Although he did not live to see the school re-opened, he did meet with its two new *Roshei Yeshiva*, Rabbi Yaakov Busel and Rabbi Eliyahu Brudny of Beth Medrash Govoha, both outstanding Talmudic scholars.

Unfortunately, shortly after Bunim passed away, Rabbi Brudny's father died suddenly. Rabbi Brudny had to assume his father's position as *rosh yeshiva* at the Mirrer Yeshiva. He was replaced by Rabbi Yosef Eichenstein of Yeshiva Chaim Berlin, an outstanding talmudic scholar. People said, "Look at the *Roshei Yeshiva*'s first names: Yaakov and Yosef, like the school itself. Mr. Bunim would have said that's a sign from *Shamayim* that the Yeshiva will flourish."

Indeed, it is flourishing. Established in Edison in 1981, it was named the Irving M. Bunim High School and Mesivta of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School. Although the naming was a significant honor for Bunim's memory, it was not without precedent. In the period of the Kings, Chizkiyahu the King, as one of the greatest Torah disseminators of all time, was honored by the rabbis placing a yeshiva on his *kever*.²³ So it was figuratively with Bunim. Not only was the school named after him, but the program continued all the policies that Bunim had worked so hard to institute.

In a remarkably short period of time the new RJJ established itself as one of the most acclaimed yeshivos in America, attracting many of the finest *talmidim* in the United States and Israel. Sons of

the most outstanding *roshei yeshiva* are competing to enter at all levels of the *mesivta* and *beis midrash*. For the school bearing his name to experience such a revival was the greatest tribute Bunim could have received. He had spent a lifetime fulfilling a singular goal, the charge entrusted to him as a boy in Volozhin: to build Torah in America.

NOTES

1. Partisans of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Yeshiva argue that it, and not Yeshiva Etz Chaim, was the prototype of the day school in America. For a full discussion see Marvin Schick, "The Oldest Yeshiva in America?" *RJJ Dinner Journal* (1979); G. Klaperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University* (New York: 1969) pp. 124-30. "As far as the later years are concerned, it is important to emphasize that, although RJJ no longer exists as an advanced Yeshiva, it produced hundreds of rabbis and community leaders in the late 1940s, the 1950s and 1960s. It was also an important feeder school for the Beth Medrash Govoha." W. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, p. 360, n. 63. (Helmreich's comment antedates the opening of the RJJ Mesivta in Edison, N.J., in 1981).
2. Dr. Marvin Schick, interviewed January 8, 1981.
3. Proverbs (*Mishlei*) 6:23.
4. See above chap. 2 for more detail of the *Ridbaz*.
5. Dr. Marvin Schick, interviewed January 8, 1983.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Daniel Meyers, interviewed May 6, 1983.
8. *Ibid.*
9. W. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva* (New York, The Free Press: 1982) p. 360, n. 63.
10. *Ibid.* p. 34.
11. David Goldberg, interviewed December 15, 1975. Rabbi Shaul Kagan, interviewed November 12, 1984.
12. Rabbi Moses Tendler (*Rosh Yeshiva* at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, chairman of the Biology Department, Yeshiva College, Rabbi of Community Synagogue of Monsey, NY), interviewed December 12, 1980.
13. Rabbi Yitzchak Feigelstock (*Rosh Yeshiva* of Mesivta of Long Beach), interviewed November 6, 1985.
14. The source for these remarks about RJJ is Rabbi Shaul Kagan, interviewed November 12, 1984.
15. Herbert Tenzer (besides the positions mentioned in the text, Mr. Tenzer is a former chairman of Barton's Bonbonnierre and a partner in the law firm of Tenzer, Greenblatt, Fallon, and Kaplan), interviewed May 11, 1984. See also *Hapardes*, vol. 16, no. 7 (October, 1942) p. 3.

16. Rabbi Yitzchak Feigelstock, interviewed August 12, 1984.
17. Code of Jewish Law (*Shulchan Aruch*) Orach Chaim 554§1-5.
18. The source of the report on the Board of Regents hearing is Herbert Tenzer, interviewed May 11, 1984.
19. W. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, p. 46.
20. Dr. Marvin Schick, interviewed January 8, 1983.
21. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*) *Nedarim* 81a.
22. Rabbi Yaakov Busel, (co-Rosh Yeshiva [with Rabbi Yosef Eichenstein] of RJJ), interviewed December 12, 1983.
23. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*) *Bava Kamma* 16b.