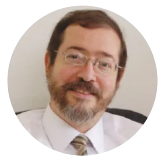


# WHERE MARYLAND MEETS THE MIR



By **Eytan Kobre** | DECEMBER 30, 2014



**“When he learned that Rav Lopiansky, then a maggid shiur in Mir Yerushalayim, was willing to consider the position, he made him an offer he couldn’t refuse.”**



*Rav Ahron Lopiansky was a maggid shiur in Mir Yerushalayim when he was invited to head a yeshivah in Silver Spring. What is it about Rav Ahron’s own background and experiences that has enabled him to successfully integrate the values and passion of the Mir into this quintessence of American suburbia?*

**S**ilver Spring, Maryland is every bit as suburban as the name sounds, an upper-middle-class bedroom community that most of the Orthodox Jews employed by the federal government in nearby Washington DC call home. In a town where physicists and economists predominate and real estate moguls are scarce, Silver Spring’s longstanding frum community is one in which ideas are valued over mansions with Ferraris out front, and the brand of Orthodoxy is of a decidedly modern orientation.

But situated in Silver Spring’s geographic and spiritual center is an institution that, for two decades now, has been playing against type, creating a hub of Torah learning and living on a level that some said could never survive, let alone thrive, in these parts. The man at its head all these years is an improbable fit in his own right: a student of Torah greats like Rav Nachum Partzovitz and ybdlch”t Rav Moshe Shapiro and a Torah personality himself, his wife a scion of the Finkel family of Yeshivas Mir fame. Yet the more one learns about the institution, the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, and the longer one spends speaking with the man, Rav Ahron Lopiansky, the clearer it becomes just how much they and Silver Spring are a singularly successful match.



## Silver Lining

It was over 50 years ago that Rav Gedaliah Anemer, then a 26-year old talmid of Cleveland's Telshe Yeshivah, arrived in the nation's capital to assume rabbinic leadership of Congregation Shomrai Emunah. Seeing that the days of Washington's Jewish community were numbered, he took two families and moved out to Silver Spring, where he established Young Israel Shomrai Emunah, founded on uncompromising fealty to halachah. As Rav Lopiansky describes it, Rabbi Anemer "picked his battles, but on halachah he couldn't be shaken. He ran the town's kashrus supervision with an iron fist, never taking money for it. He wouldn't touch geirus because he knew that otherwise he'd be put in impossible positions."

In 1964, Rabbi Anemer founded a high school with separate boys' and girls' divisions, at a time when even an Orthodox day school was still an anomaly. Fast-forward to 1995, when Rabbi Yitzchok Merkin, a Chaim Berlin alumnus and master mechanech — for years he has run Torah Umesorah's summertime teacher training institute — was completing a decade at the high school's helm. He had begun to see that for the schools to remain viable and for the town to truly thrive religiously, a high-level beis medrash was a must. Teaming up with a small group of dedicated laymen, including one person whom he says would never allow his name in print but is a "gavra rabba, a balabos who literally carried this mosad single-handedly in its first years and hasn't let go yet," he brought Yeshiva Gedolah of Greater Washington into being.

Rabbi Eli Reingold, a former rebbi in the Telshe mechinah who's marking his 18th year in Silver Spring, serves as head of the yeshivah's Kollel Zichron Amram and is a prime source of halachic guidance in town. Rabbi Merkin, he says, "does his hiring differently from most people. Instead of advertising an opening, he identifies the person he wants and goes after him. When he learned that Rav Lopiansky, then a maggid shiur in Mir Yerushalayim, was willing to consider the position, he made him an offer he couldn't refuse."

Rav Ahron might not have been able to refuse the offer, but neither was he in a position to accept it entirely. After spending most of the '80s giving the highest Gemara shiur at Aish HaTorah's Jerusalem campus, he was now a maggid shiur for a small group in the Mir, and was intrigued by the kind of challenge that Silver Spring represented. But that meant uprooting his wife and children for an uncertain future in a fledgling institution. And so, Rav Ahron came alone. For the next six years, he endured the rigors of a cross-continental commute, never spending more than three consecutive Shabbosim away from home.

In August 2001, Rebbetzin Yaffa Lopiansky — daughter of Mir Rosh Yeshivah Rav Beinisch Finkel — and their four unmarried children joined Rav Ahron in Silver Spring. While Rabbi Anemer, who taught the 11th and 12th grades in the boys' high school, bore the title of rosh yeshivah, it was Rav Ahron who served in that capacity on the day-to-day level. Twenty years and close to 450 alumni later, he is now — with Rabbi Anemer's passing in 2010 — the overall rosh yeshivah of the beis medrash and the two high schools.

Rav Lopiansky brings an unusual skill set to his position, making him uniquely suited to both the yeshivah and the area for which it serves as a focal point of Torah. He is, on the one hand, every bit the rosh yeshivah in the traditional mold, transmitting the Torah he learned from Rav Nochum and Rav Moshe in sophisticated shiurim. But not every rosh yeshivah has also authored a volume on machshavah in highly literate English or published a three-volume compendium of commentaries on the siddur, as Rav Ahron has.

With two feet firmly planted in the yeshivah world, Rav Ahron's uncommon fusion of warmth of heart and depth of mind have enabled him to build a bridge of Torah to the Silver Spring community. It is one that ever-increasing numbers of its residents traverse to attend sederim and shiurim, to savor a yeshivah davener, to ask Rav Ahron for an eitzah or Rabbi Reingold for a psak.



Rabbi Merkin observes that Rav Lopiansky “is perfect for this community because he’s intellectual, yet also very down-to-earth and normal. The Lopiansky house is very open and warm, and a lot of community people are always in and out there. The Rebbetzin doesn’t teach, but she knows how to make people feel very comfortable.” Rabbi Reingold adds that “Rav Ahron is unflappable, and even when very controversial topics come up in a shiur, he discusses them with total calm, although he’ll say afterward ‘You think inside I was calm?’”

For his part, Rav Ahron is effusive about the metamorphosis that the yeshivah has wrought in Silver Spring. “The yeshivah’s impact in both quality and quantity has been incredible. Before its arrival, there was maybe a shiur by the rav in shul once a week and that was it. Here, the beis medrash is open all night and all Shabbos, there’s a daf yomi shiur, an Avos Ubonim, regular shiurim that are open to all. Most importantly, the growth and change have been peaceful, and the yeshivah has remained a welcoming home to all.

“What’s special about the people here is that they are, by and large, professionals, intellectuals, who respect learning and are open to it. They appreciate a solid shiur.”

As Torah learning has flourished, the community has grown too: over 60 of the yeshivah’s bochurim have married local girls, most settling locally. A new shul named Ohr HaTorah, led by Lakewood talmid Rabbi Michoel Frank, is comprised largely of the yeshivah’s alumni, and the elementary school now has four parallel grades as a result of the influx of young families.

But what is it about Rav Ahron’s own background and experiences that has enabled him to successfully integrate the values and passion of the Mir into this quintessence of American suburbia?

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