

Mishpacha

ORDAINED IN

cyberspace

BY Yisroel Besser
PHOTOS Eli Cobin



Chag hasmichah, Internet-style. "Everyone appreciates their own rabbanim more"

One day we might discover that Citi Field was erected to host the Asifa, MetLife Stadium was built in honor of the Siyum haShas ... and the Internet was developed to enable Jews from all corners of the world to connect to Torah. That's the vision of Reb Dovid Engel, a young Gerrer chassid who travels the world — by air and by cyberspace — to inspire doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, and just about any committed Jew to become a rabbi

I notice my interviewee before he notices me, and it's immediately obvious what makes him stand out.

He's walking along Teaneck's Queen Anne Street — as central to this neighborhood as 13th Avenue is to Boro Park, or Rechov Malchei Yisrael is to Jerusalem — headed to the coffee shop where we've arranged to meet. The scene on the thoroughfare resembles that of its better-known counterparts: businessmen on cell phones, mothers smiling into strollers, a few senior citizens sitting leisurely outdoors, spectators to the midday bustle.

Really, he should stand out. His high Gerrer hat and peyos, trousers tucked into socks and the "walk" — the rapid, swinging pace that speaks of the focus and alacrity unique to his

Chassidus — should draw attention here in this hub of Modern Orthodoxy.

But he doesn't. And then it becomes clear why he's so well-suited to his work — it's this ability to seamlessly connect and fit in with all sorts of Jews, in all sorts of locations and cultures. Not a chassid in Teaneck, just a good Jew among good Jews.

Seated across from him, I realize something else: I've rarely interviewed people younger than self — but though Reb Dovid Engel oozes youthfulness and enthusiasm, it isn't from lack of experience or accomplishment.

The yeshiva he leads has no eastern wall. In fact, it has no wall at all, but it does have *talmidim* — doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals from around the world.



YPS founder Reb Fishel Todd "is the one who keeps me inspired"

It also has no historical precedent. Pirchei Shoshanim, an Internet learning project culminating in *smichah* in accordance with the grueling exams of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, might raise eyebrows — a harnessing of the tools offered by a new world to teach wisdom as old as time.

"At a Pirchei Shoshanim *siyum* where all our participants received their *smichah* certificates, Ateres Yisrael *mashgiach* Rav Chaim Walkin was the guest speaker," Reb Dovid remarks. "The Mashgiach quoted the *gemara* in *Avodah Zarah* that when Mashiah comes, the nations of the world will also be called to judgment. They will claim that everything they did — the bridges they built, the roads they paved — they did for the sake of Yisrael. The Mashgiach said, 'I have no doubt that when that day comes, we will discover that Citi Field was erected to host the Asifa, and MetLife Stadium was built in honor of the Siyum haShas ... and the Internet was developed to enable Jews from all corners of the world to connect to this learning program, to be part of something so magnificent.'"

Rabbi Engel is serious. "That idea is really our mission statement. It wasn't easy, especially when we started, to launch an Internet-based learning program. The Internet is a vehicle of so much impurity — could it really be the means to increase holiness?"

Actually, the mission he refers to is one



Reb Dovid with Rav Nissim Karelitz. “Come after Yom Tov and I myself will perform the *giyur*”

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YEAR

started long ago, before there was an Internet, before Dovid Engel was even born.

Rav Leibel Berenbaum of Bnei Brak was a unique figure — brilliant, original, a master of Torah and scholarship. The son of the revered *rosh yeshivah* of the Mirrer Yeshivah Brooklyn Rav Shmuel Berenbaum *ztz”l*, Rav Leibel burned with desire to share his Torah with others. Among his many innovations was a program to share the fundamentals of halachah with the masses. If people were to have a clear grasp of the halachos that govern their lives, he felt their connection with Yiddishkeit would be more profound and more meaningful.

Rav Leibel died young, leaving a home full of orphans, but he also left over a beloved *talmid*, Reb Fishel Todd, who inherited this zeal for spreading Torah. Reb Fishel, a prominent attorney, conceived of a program that would equip any Yid in any corner of the globe with the means to master the halachic minutiae that govern the kitchen, the Shabbos table, or the office.

Pirchei Shoshanim was established as a way to realize Reb Leibel’s dream, and the Internet, at the time the new frontier in networking, seemed to be the medium with which to reach the greatest number of Jews.

The program was fine-tuned, with different tracks for different levels; eventually, a first-class *smichah* program, created and led

by prominent *rabbanim* including Rav Dovid Ostroff and Rav Daniel Channen, became available. This grueling, test-heavy program, which necessitates many weekly hours of extra learning, became the crown of Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim’s many programs.

Of course, the online *smichah* program wasn’t meant to replace regular *shiurim*, and the ordination, although legitimate, wasn’t meant to create pulpit rabbis. Rather, it was to be an organized framework with a pace, exams, and downloadable source material. It would be a beginning, a starting point in intensive learning. Those *rabbanim* who designed the curriculum would also mark the tests and award the *smichos*, a structure intended for the diligent and focused. Initially there was a steady stream of applicants from around the world, but it soon became clear that a vetting process was needed. Applicants must be G-d-fearing, halachically observant,

and maintain a high level of moral integrity, and be recommended by a recognized Orthodox rabbi.

And as in any yeshivah, a formal infrastructure was needed, so “*rosh yeshivah*” Reb Fishel turned over day-to-day operations to the young, dynamic Gerrer chassid. Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim, or YPS, had its concept, its target audience, its visionary — and now, it also had a heart and soul. Dovid Engel is a man of many gifts: a disarming smile, an ability to think on his feet, and an endless repository of stories and experiences, collected through interacting with all sorts of Jews, in all sorts of locations.

What a Wedding Dovid Engel grew up in Monsey, studied in the Gerrer yeshivah in Brooklyn, and after getting engaged to a girl from Bnei Brak, traveled to Eretz Yisrael to learn. The plan was to return to America and settle there; he thought he’d go into business. Yet some time before the wedding, when the Gerrer Rebbe received the customary *kvittel* to bless the couple, the Rebbe threw a wrench into their plans. He told them to remain in Eretz Yisrael.

And so Dovid Engel joined the Gerrer kollel, a young *avreich* among thousands like him.

A few years later, this charismatic and well-connected *yungerman* was offered to join this yeshivah without walls; at the time, the Internet was a suspect, dangerous entity. “Through his son, Rav Shmuel Berenbaum became *nasi* of YPS. When I went to the Rebbe to ask his advice about coming on board, he asked which *gedolim* backed it, and I told him that Rav Shmuel Berenbaum was the *nasi* and had encouraged me to take the job. I also spoke to Rav Ezriel Auerbach, who was then very involved, and came back to the Rebbe with the okay from these two *gedolim*. I wanted the Rebbe’s *haskamah* and *brachah*, and he sent me to people who understood the Internet and its challenges. It was at the beginning, before filters and kosher providers and all that, just a DSL packet.”

In Gur, the *shtiebel* is more than a shul; it’s where the ebb and flow of everyday chassidic

life happens, learning, davening, and conversation. So the young American kept his new career a secret, not really comfortable with explaining that he ran a yeshivah on the Internet — even with the Rebbe’s *heter* and blessing. He maintained the regular kollel schedule, and worked late at night. Soon, however, when he needed to enlist his *shtiebel* friends, the secret was out.

It happened with a YPS student from Brazil. In addition to the *smichah* track — the Shulchan Aruch Learning Project — Pirchei Shoshanim offers a beginners’ course to sincere Jews around the world, teaching the basics of Judaism with source material, online accessible *rabbanim* and Reb Dovid’s own personal touch. A Brazilian convert, a descendant of Anusim, applied to this track; he wished to learn the *alef beis* and other basics.

Part of the registration process for Pirchei Shoshanim involves filling out a form detailing background and affiliation, and Reb Dovid, an astute and seasoned visitor to many countries as director of YPS, discerned something was amiss. When he asked the student for a copy of the *giyur* certificate, the hapless

fellow explained that he’d never gotten one. After the almost-*ger* had already spent thousands of dollars, the “rabbi” had insisted he fork over more money, and he just couldn’t afford it. Reb Dovid soon exposed the scam and frightened the unscrupulous rabbi into resigning from the *geirus* industry.

Yet the unfortunate Brazilian, who wanted so badly to be accepted as a Jew, was afraid to make a commotion, fearing the local Jewish community would reject him if it became clear that he didn’t have an authentic conversion. A year later, the Brazilian and his wife came to Eretz Yisrael for the month of Tishrei and stayed in Moshav Bat Ayin. The day after Yom Kippur, a *rav* from that community appealed to Reb Dovid on behalf of the guest. “I watched him daven, saw his sincerity and desire. You must help this couple be accepted as Jews!”

Reb Dovid recognized that a top-tier *posek* was needed, but, it being the *bein hazmanim* period, the *beis din* of Rav Nissim Karelitz wasn’t in session. Ever-resourceful, Reb Dovid went to Rav Karelitz’s home early in the morning, but was informed that he

shouldn’t knock, since the *rebbetzin* was then davening.

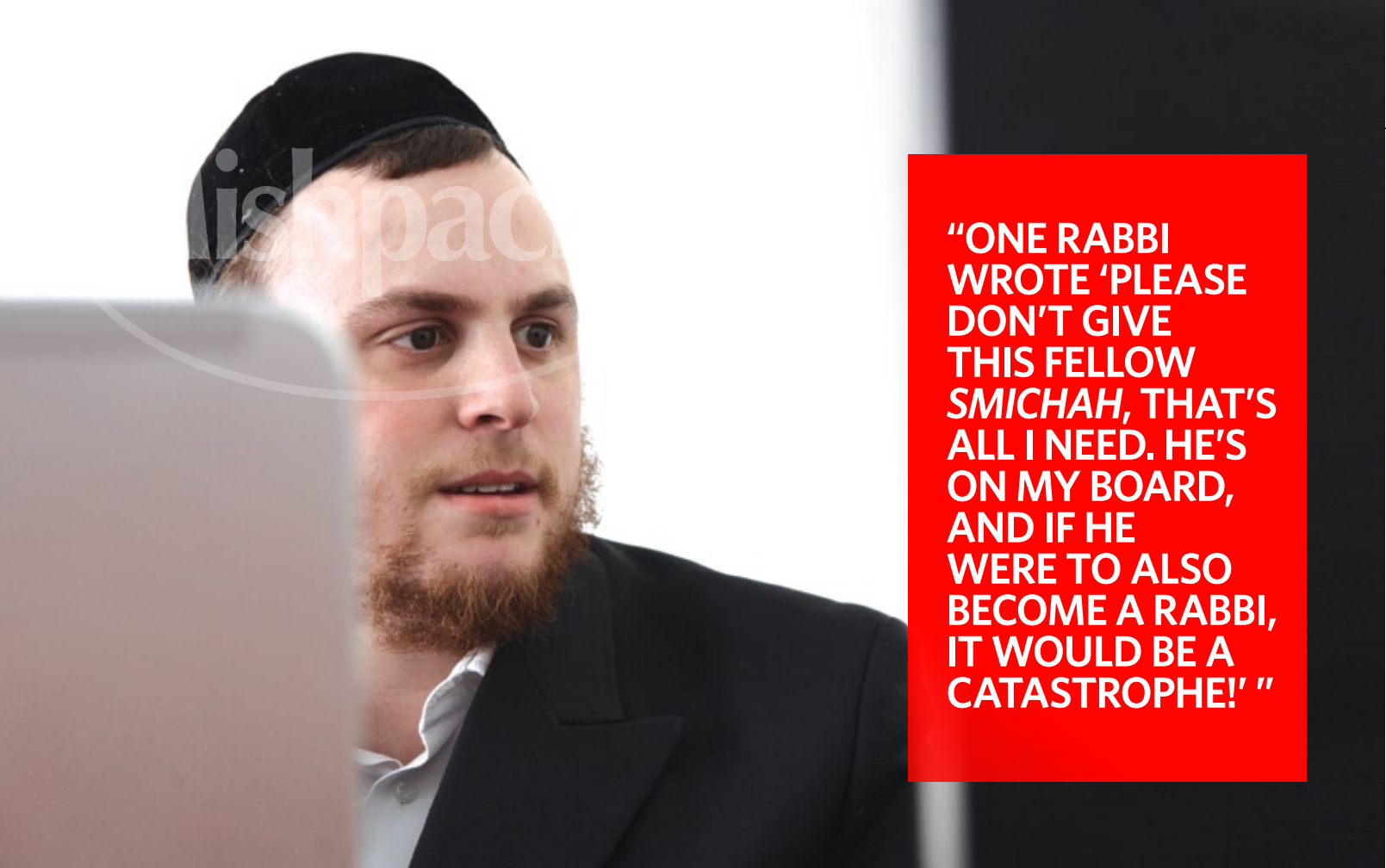
“*Perfect*, I thought, and I immediately knocked,” Reb Dovid recalls. With his vigilante wife in prayer, Rav Nissim himself opened the door and welcomed in his uninvited guest.

“He spent a full hour listening to the story and trying to find a solution for them. He wanted to know what halachos they already knew, and told me to bring them to him on Chol HaMoed Succos, but not to tell them the reason for the visit.”

Reb Dovid invited the couple for a Chol HaMoed meal, and then led them to Rav Nissim’s home. As is customary on Yom Tov, Rav Nissim’s table was surrounded by visitors and well-wishers, among them an English-speaking member of the *beis din*, Rav Wiesel.

The *chavrei beis din* began to interview the couple, asking about the conduct in their home. When they were done, Rav Nissim called over Reb Dovid and said, “*Ich vehl machen dem giyur*, come after Yom Tov and I myself will perform the conversion.”





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Two days after Succos, Reb Dovid and his South American friends came together; Rav Nissim was present for the entire process, made a *Mi shebeirach* and gave each of them a Jewish name and a *brachah* to have a *ben zachar* within the year. Then he announced: “The *chuppah* will be at my home in one hour.”

Reb Dovid hurried off to get a ring and they all met at the Karelitz home, where Rav Nissim officiated at the kosher marriage ceremony. He turned to Reb Dovid afterward. “*Nu? Vos iz mit a seudah?*”

Unflappable, Reb Dovid replied, “Twenty minutes, in my house.” It was about a hour before sunset.

“Make sure you *bentsch* and recite the *sheva brachos* before *shkiyah*,” advised Rav Nissim.

At that point, Reb Dovid Engel’s night job became public.

“At a time like that,” admits Reb Dovid, “you need the *shtiebel*. I made a few phone calls, one person brought food, another schlepped benches, and a third came with drinks. Everyone came together, and we washed with

half an hour to *shkiyah*, and then *bentsched* and got up to dance. It became a joint project of joy.

“The end of that story is interesting. The happy couple moved back to Brazil, but Rav Nissim had stipulated that they had to move to a *frum* community. The husband, a postal manager, applied for a job transfer, but his supervisor said jobs were scarce and there wasn’t a chance.”

Reb Dovid, the quintessential networker, contacted a Pirchei Shoshanim alumnus named Yosef Zukin in Rio, who called in a few political favors — and secured a new job for his fellow Jew and fellow *talmid*.

Oh, and a year later the couple had a baby boy. The *sandak* was Reb Dovid Engel. The baby’s name? Nissim.

Too Many Rabbis? Rabbi Engel travels around the world to promote and sustain YPS and connect with its roster of *talmidim*; many of these beginners also look to Reb Dovid — often one of the first Orthodox Jews they encounter — for help in other areas of their life. It could be *chi-*

nuch or *shalom bayis*, or even moving to and resettling in a more Jewish area.

Often, after corresponding with him via e-mail or phone, they are shocked when the Gerrer *yungerman* shows up in full garb at their Brazilian or Panamanian homes. “Once at a YPS convention, one of the older participants asked my name. I said I was Dovid Engel and he was stunned. His eyes narrowed and finally, he said ‘I don’t believe it. I have socks that are older than you.’”

Many of the people he encounters, either in person or cyberspace, might be beginners in Torah learning, but they are often professionals at the top of their fields. “It’s humiliating for such accomplished people to go sit by the rabbi’s *shiur* and ask all their beginners’ questions, so here, where they are relatively anonymous, they feel more comfortable, starting from the bottom up,” Reb Dovid explains.

Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim has several tracks, but even in the *smichah* program, many applicants sign up specifically because they lack a background in learning.

I wonder about traditional *kavod rabbanus*, respect for scholars. Does it really help to empower any interested individual with *smichah*, creating little rabbis in every *kehillah*?

Apparently, I’m in good company with the question.

“You know who asked that? The Gerrer Rebbe himself.”

During a YPS convention in Jerusalem, the visitors expressed an interest in meeting Reb Dovid’s rebbe.

The Gerrer Rebbe is a awe-inspiring presence, although not the typical address for the English-speaking American tourist in search of words of inspiration. Still, the group insisted.

“I asked the *gabbai* if we could come in and explained what sort of group it was. ‘*Vuss, a dokter zohl verren a ruv?*’ asked the Rebbe pithily, wondering about the propriety of equipping laypeople with *smichah*.” Reb Dovid explained that the program isn’t trying to create practicing rabbis, but rather, learned *balabatim* with a real appreciation for the nuances of halachah.

“A well-known Israeli *apikorus* once debated a prominent Hesder *rosh yeshivah*, challenging him: ‘Would you accept me in your yeshivah, knowing that I hold heretical views that you consider dangerous?’ I loved the *rosh yeshivah*’s answer. He said, ‘Of course I would, because as soon as you learn, you wouldn’t be an *apikorus* anymore.’

“Part of the process involves showing a letter of recommendation from a rabbi, and we sometimes find that the *rabbanim* are nervous about their laypeople earning *smichah*.” Reb Dovid laughs. “One rabbi wrote the recommendation and then added, ‘Please don’t give this fellow *smichah*, that’s all I need. He’s on my board, and if he were to also become a rabbi, it would be a catastrophe!’

“One of our *talmidim* introduced me to his *rav*, Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld, who quipped, ‘A rabbi from a computer? I don’t know about that ... I had to strain my eyes

for five years over the old-print *Shulchan Aruch*, with cracked binding and tiny letters....’

“We explain to the *rabbanim* that generally, it works in their favor to have their *balabatim* have the *smichah* learning experience. For starters, it gives them a real appreciation and respect for their *rabbanim*, once they see how hard it is to really master *issur v’heter* and all the practical applications.

“The graduates know that their *smichah* isn’t to enable them to *pasken sh’eilos*; rather, it’s meant to teach them to ask learned *sh’eilos* of their own. It’s known that Rav Moshe Feinstein used to write his phone number on the back of any *smichah* he would give, to encourage them to keep in touch should a question arise.

“Also, it gives some of these professionals a tremendous boost in their own work when they can connect it back to Torah. At a recent Shabbaton, we had the *talmidim* deliver *chaburos*, and most of them spoke about a halachic topic in their area of expertise. We had a dentist deliver a beautiful presentation on cleaning dentures for Pesach, and an actuary speak about *ribis* and insurance plans.”

After that initial meeting between the Gerrer Rebbe and the YPS *talmidim*, the Rebbe seemed to have developed an appreciation for the concept, and now actually encourages Reb Dovid to keep pushing himself.

Dovid Engel doesn’t mind the long hours his job entails, but the travel is a serious challenge for a father of young children. As the participants in the various Pirchei Shoshanim programs around the globe get to know the personable young man, they welcome him into their lives — often pleading with him to come to their communities for Shabbos, to join their *simchahs*. Reb Dovid discussed the frequent travel and the long hours with the Rebbe, wondering if he was compelled to respond to every invitation and request.

“I always ask the Rebbe’s *brachah* before

I travel, but I was about to undertake a trip that was really exhausting and I was simply not in the mood; I had been traveling frequently and deep down, I was hoping the Rebbe would scratch this one.”

It was a journey that was to begin in Eretz Yisrael and take Reb Dovid to New York, then Panama, back to the West Coast of the US and then down to Australia, and finally back to Israel via Hong Kong. The Rebbe reacted by tracing, with his finger, the direction of the journey on an imaginary globe. “*Aza nesiah*,” the Rebbe said, running his finger through the air in a loop that charted the itinerary. As to the time away from home, the Rebbe encouraged his chassid to continue. “*Tist oiff fahr Klal Yisrael* — You’re doing for Klal Yisrael,” he said.

One sentence, but it recharged the young man.

There was a prominent *rav* from New York’s Syrian community, Rabbi Meir Yedid, whom Reb Dovid had been trying to get hold of for some time, with no success. “We were at this hotel in Panama for Shabbos — it was the *simchah* of a YPS *talmid* from South America and most of the people were using the Shabbos elevator. I went to climb the stairs, and there was another fellow walking alongside me; we introduced ourselves, and it was Rav Yedid. I had 30 flights of steps upon which to speak with him.”

And like a true chassid, he shares a *chasidishe maiseh*. “I was in this ornate shul in Panama and I needed some private space during davening, so I walked down to the basement. It was a massive, empty room and when I walked in, I was confronted with a large picture dominating the wall — the Gerrer Rebbe. I don’t know why the Sephardic *kehillah* had the Rebbe’s picture, but for me, it was regards from home. It was as if, in lieu of having Shabbos with my family and being in the *shtiebel*, the Rebbe was saying ‘You’re doing for Klal Yisrael.’”

It’s told of the Sfas Emes that he once asked a chassid traveling to Paris to purchase some of the city’s fine cigars for him. The chassid, distracted by his business concerns, forgot about the cigars, but on the way home he

Ordained in Cyberspace

remembered, and found even better cigars for the Rebbe. When he came in to the Sfias Emes with the gift, the Rebbe remarked, “Fool, do you think I wanted the cigars? I wanted that you would recall in Paris that you had a rebbe....”

Reb Dovid never forgets that he has a Rebbe.

One Family Does Reb Dovid always wear his chassidic Shabbos garb, even in places where visible signs of Judaism aren’t as common? He squares his shoulders, an almost imperceptible gesture of pride, before answering in the affirmative. “At that Shabbos *simchah*, there was a well-known chassidic singer who told me that if he’d known I was going to bring my *spodik* along, he wouldn’t have been uncomfortable bringing his *shtreimel*.

“Once one of the prominent *balabatim* in a South American city insisted that I join his family for a *simchah*. We were walking home from shul on Shabbos down the street, and he exclaimed, ‘Ten years ago, I was working on Shabbos. Now, here I am walking in the street with a Jew like *this*, with this type of hat!’ It made *him* feel Shabbosdig.”

The *talmidim* of YPS have formed alliances of their own; two *talmidim* became *mechutanim*. Another time, someone called Reb Dovid looking for a *chavrusa* in preparation for the *smichah* exam. “He worked at Citibank on the 16th floor, and I suggested another *talmid* who worked on the 14th floor. Before that, each of them didn’t even know the other existed.”

The yeshivah has *talmidim* in every professional sector, all over the world, and they’ve become quite a family of their own.

“One of our *talmidim* suffered from headaches, and eventually started to lose his eyesight as a result, *Rachmana litzlan*. He had basic Medicaid and was receiving poor medical care. Another *talmid*, a prominent ophthalmologist named Rabbi Dr. Ben Rubin, flew his fellow student into Washington, and arranged for him to be treated — gratis. When it became evident that the problem was more serious, Dr. Rubin prevailed upon a neurologist colleague to step in and help out as well.”

Another YPS *talmid* is Rabbi Dr. Jay Bauman, who responded to an e-mail blast from YPS that there was an irreligious family in Maryland that had agreed to make a bris for their newborn son, but the bris was to be on Shabbos and they would only consent to use a *mohel* who was also a doctor. Dr. Bauman seized the opportunity, leaving his family in New York for Shabbos and traveling to perform the Shabbos bris.

One Day Soon For all his apparent boundless energy, Dovid Engel says it’s Fishel Todd who’s kept him inspired. “Reb Fishel is always looking for new ways to help Yidden all around the world study Torah. The latest project he put on my plate was translating the entire *smichah* program into Spanish. There are thousands of Spanish speakers who could be studying if given the chance, and he wants to make that possible for them.”

Reb Dovid’s position — as a central figure in the lives of hundreds of *talmidim* working their way toward *smichah* — raises an obvious question: Did he ever study for *smichah*?

For the first time in our conversation, he is at a loss for words, blushing slightly. He recovers quickly, though. “I always say that Reb Fishel Todd, the program’s founder and the real *rosh yeshivah*, gave me *smichah* — *smichah* in dedication, in being committed to the program’s participants. He is a constant role model to me, and working alongside such a visionary is itself impetus to keep going, to feel the privilege of serving other Jews.

“But if you mean formal rabbinic *smichah* ... one day, with Hashem’s help. It’s a dream I’d like to realize.

“You know, there was this fellow in the program whose wife was giving him a really hard time as he grew closer to Yiddishkeit. Eventually, she came on board, but she was really intimidated by his decision to go for *smichah*, fearing the idea of being married to a rabbi.

“And then at a recent Shabbaton, this woman was telling *my* wife that I should really set myself a goal of *smichah* and start learning the

sources. ‘It’s not so hard,’ she said. ‘It meant two years of not seeing my husband, but the fulfillment is incredible.’” ●



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