



by RABBI Y.Y. RUBINSTEIN



Yisroel Roll was born in Montreal. He was the oldest of three children and had a younger brother and sister. His father was an engineer and his mother an accountant.

His Canadian Jewish childhood was a happy one despite the fact Montreal can reach minus 25 degrees centigrade! Yisroel attended Herzliah High School and, being a Canadian boy, he was “born on skates,” and played ice hockey. He was also very involved with the NCSY organization which brought *Yiddishkeit* to teenagers from non-frum homes.

After graduating high school, he headed to New York and Yeshiva University where he majored in political science. From there he moved to Toronto where he studied law and became a lawyer specializing in criminal defense and litigation. At that time, he married Julie Brown from Memphis, Tennessee and soon the couple were expecting their first child.

The Roll’s future looked secure and bright. Yisroel had a good job. They owned their home and had a beautiful baby. There was only one obstacle to the Rolls settling into a comfortable middle class Jewish life and it came from a

A Mind Bursting With Ideas

surprising and unexpected source – Yisroel Roll!

One day, at work, some of his colleagues were discussing what they would do if they won the lottery. All said they would quit their jobs and set off on exciting adventures. Yisroel declared that he would quit his job and set off to become a Rabbi.

It was a strange thing to say as he had just been told that he was going to be made a junior partner in his firm. In a real sense, he *had* won the lottery!

One of the senior partners took him aside and said, “If that is what you really want to do, money should not stand in your way!”

A short time later, he and Julie attended a Purim *seudah* when one of his friends, Danny Eisen, spoke. In his *drashah*, he quoted the *passuk* in *Vayikra* 19:32, “*Mipenei seivah tokum* – You should stand before the aged.” His friend quoted the *Zohar* which suggests that the *passuk* should be read, “You should stand up *before* you become aged!”

Yisroel told me he looked at this wife and imagined them

both in their 80s with him saying, “You know Julie, I so much regret we never went to Eretz Yisrael to fulfill my dream of becoming a Rabbi.”

That night, the Rolls determined that such a conversation would never take place. Yisroel left his lucrative job and the young family headed to Yerushalayim.

A few years later, with *semichah* from both Harav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg *zt”l* and Harav Yitzchok Kolitz *zt”l*, the young Rabbi was recruited by a community leader, Dr. Michael Sinclair, from London. He had heard of his talents and his passion to reach out to unaffiliated Jews. Dr. Sinclair offered Rabbi Roll a challenge. His shul was one of the oldest and most beautiful in England, the New West End Synagogue. It badly needed someone who could reverse a seemingly irreversible decline, someone with new ideas. As we will see, new innovative ideas were Rabbi Roll’s forté.

With the *brochah* of his *Rebbi*, Harav Moshe Shapiro *zt”l*, the Rolls moved to their fourth country, England. Yisroel jokes that most of his children were born in different countries.

His new shul is indeed very beautiful, but it was also very stuck in its history and its ways. Rabbi Roll arrived and in a short time launched a revolution.

He began by suggesting offering free membership. A shul whose members were very old suddenly became infused with 160 new families! A congregation for whom synagogue was traditional English pomp and ceremony, was soon hosting *Shabbatons* with scholars in residence, such as Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, *shlita*, Harav Akiva Tatz, *shlita*, and *ybl”c* Harav Nachman Bulman, *zt”l* and a host of other well-known Rabbonim.

That was when I first met Yisroel. I remember being amused at the somewhat stunned expressions on the faces of the older congregants as they explained that their new young Rabbi had started a Sunday morning *cheder* and gotten over forty kids to attend. They were equally perplexed by the new learning program he had initiated with four different *shiurim* on *Gemarah*, *Chumash*, *hashkafah* and *Halachah*. He had brought in women’s programs too and a host of other new ideas.

The old folks might not have fully understood what the whirlwind they had appointed was doing, but they did understand that suddenly, a shul that had been very near to closing its doors, was growing and vibrant.

In 1995 Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *z”l*, acknowledged Yisroel’s innovative approach, presenting his shul his Community of the Year Award. It recognized the transformation he had made, turning a shul into a community center. That approach was soon copied across Anglo Jewry.

A year later, the Chief Rabbi called together several Rabbis to discuss something called the Limmud Conference. This attempted to bring Reform and Orthodox Jews together

in a huge week-long educational event. Generously financed and attracting many British Jews, its clear goal was to blur the distinctions between Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations. It posed (and still poses) a profound danger to Anglo-Jewry.

Rabbi Sacks asked Rabbi Roll to do something to counter it. He came up with an Orthodox alternative called the Encounter Conference.

Yisroel took on the task of overcoming doubts among many British Rabbis that this solution would work. Drawing on many of his previous initiatives in 1996, he launched his first Encounter Conference, attended by 1,400 participants, at London University. World-class Orthodox speakers arrived from across the globe. The anti-Orthodox Limmud Conference was shocked as an authentic alternative proved itself a massive success.

By the second year Rabbi Roll had brought his concept to Britain’s second biggest *kehilla*, Manchester. Soon smaller communities across the U.K. were hosting Encounter’s speakers as satellite conferences sprung up across the country.

In 1997, with Encounter firmly on the map, Yisroel left his shul behind and moved to North London to set up a brand-new shul called Netzach Yisroel, working with the U.K.’s Project Seed.

In the year 2000, Rabbi Roll brought Encounter to the U.S.A. and settled in Baltimore. Somehow, the Rabbi whose ideas to spread Torah seem endless, managed to complete a degree in clinical counseling and set up a practice too.

Additionally, he is the author of ten books. Some titles address his specialty of self-esteem and anxiety; others are pure Torah where he brings the teachings of two of his greatest *Rebbis*, Harav Shapiro and *ybl”c* Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu, to the English-speaking public.

His most recent project in Baltimore is setting up another Netzach Yisroel community. This iteration caters to *baalei teshuva* who are seeking inspiration, between five and ten years after becoming observant.

He noticed that many *baalei teshuva* had started to lose their original fire and passion. Unsurprisingly, Yisroel has crafted numerous programs and initiatives to revive that fire. Once again, he is reaching out, sharing his ideas with other shuls.

Mipenei seivah tokum — Stand up *before* you become aged! Yisroel Roll did so and *b’ezras Hashem*, will keep doing so for a very long time. ■

Rabbi Rubinstein is a renowned author and lecturer. He lives in New York and travels all over the world to speak and teach.

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