

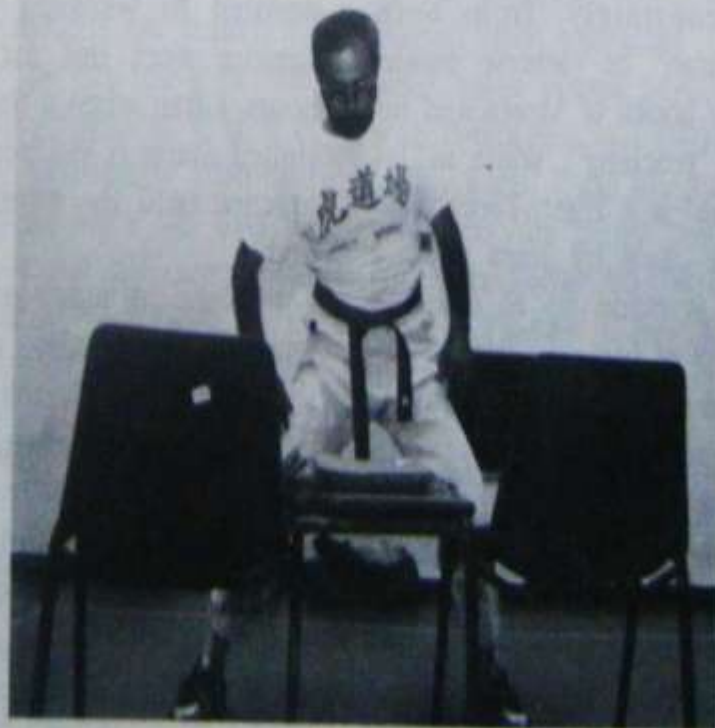
Torah DOJO: A way of life

By Deborah Klein

Sounds of exertion, movement, and strength, emanate from the gym at the Baka community center where *Torah Dojo Karate-Ka* (students of Karate) work out. In the center of the room a short, compact young man wearing a t-shirt with "Torah Dojo" printed on it in Hebrew and Chinese, a brown belt tied around his waist, patiently corrects the stance of a young yellow belt. Then he walks to the front of the room and shouts instructions while the yellow belts move

up and down, punching and blocking. Older students, many wearing brown belts and *Torah Dojo* t-shirts collect at the back of the room, waiting for class to begin. Some chat while others practice and warm-up, one poised brown belt does a startling display with a pair of *tunfas*, a simple weapon made of a bar of wood with a handle). His quick, precise movements are a study of power and grace.

Torah Dojo was founded in New York by professor Chaim Sober, who



studied Kung Fu under the Chan family in Chinatown. This was a privilege that was awarded to very few religious Jewish boys in the sixties. After Prof. Sober mastered Kung Fu, he went on to study a Japanese form of karate called *Shotokan*.

When he began to teach martial arts at Yeshiva University, Prof. Sober soon realized that *Kung Fu* was too difficult for the average Westerner to grasp without any prior training. Therefore he began to teach *Shotokan* instead, a "hard" martial art in comparison to *Kung Fu* which is softer, more subtle. *Shotokan* emphasizes precise muscular movements and physical force, whereas *Kung Fu* deals more with controlling the life-force or *chi* within the body.

Professor Sober eventually integrated the two arts, teaching the lower belts primarily *Shotokan*, while adding more and more *Kung Fu* into the training as the student reached black belt level.

Torah Dojo attempts to integrate the philosophy and tradition of Judaism with martial arts. It derives its name, appropriately, from both sources: "Torah" in Hebrew means both the five books of Moses and instruction or "teaching"; while in Japanese "Torah" is a Tiger. *Torah Dojo* is taught for Jews by Jews and its membership is made up of students from all walks of life.

Often, during classes, parallels are drawn between Chinese and Kabbalistic sources. However, no particular dogma is imposed on anyone. Each student interprets the meaning of what he learns according to his own beliefs and way of life.

Gideon Marinovsky was one of

Prof. Sober's students when he attended the Yeshiva University at the age of eighteen. For two years, Gideon trained for four hours every day, not counting the practice time he put in by himself at home. An Israeli, Gideon decided to return home at the age of twenty. He came to Israel, did his army service, and all the while continued to train at the Torah Dojo. Now, several years later, Gideon has his black belt and heads the Jerusalem dojo.

Gideon firmly asserts that *Torah Dojo* is not just a place to learn how to fight, but a way of life as well. According to him those that come to the *dojo* with the sole intention of learning how to beat up others, soon drop out of their own accord. "In the beginning we work a lot on technique, on precision, on discipline and those guys just don't have the patience to stick it out." It takes from seven to ten years to reach black belt level, as opposed to just two to three years at some other karate dojos. The training is thorough, half an hour of each two hour beginners class is devoted to warming up exercises. Seniors work out for up to three hours. Often when a teacher from the United States is visiting, students will practice until the small hours of the night.

There are many new skills to be learned if the student aims to master the art of karate. In the beginning, the new student does exercises to increase his strength, flexibility and endurance and learns how to block and to attack. After a while "conditioning" is introduced whereby the student physically toughens his knuckles and the sides of his hands on the fists. However, stu-

dents under the age of fifteen do not do this as their bones are still developing. Hardening of the hands is also achieved by punching a "makiwara", or a wooden plank stuck in the ground covered by ropes. It takes the practice of years to harden the hands. The results of many hours spent in front of the makiwara can be seen on Gideon's right fist, where his two first knuckles have become flattened and hardened.

As students progress from white belt, through yellow, green, and purple to brown belt, the practice of breaking boards is gradually introduced. To reach the level of brown belt, all students, both male and female, are required to break three boards, i.e. six centimeters of solid wood. In the beginning, students use pure physical strength to break the boards or tiles, but as they get more expert the force of "chi energy" is used in addition. The student learns to control his "chi energy" or internal energy by the practice of meditation and chi kung exercises. Specific breathing exercises are used to develop the internal muscles.

When the student has control of his "chi energy" he can use it to root himself into the ground so that it is difficult for the opponent to push him over. This internal force can also be directed against the opponent. Because the power of the trained Torah Dojo student comes more from control of the "chi energy" than from physical force, and muscular development and size are not an important factor. A woman who is an expert at directing her "chi" can hold her own against a man three times her size.

While the concept of "chi"

strengthening is often seen as strange or bizarre by the average Westerner, this is not the case in China. In the early morning, thousands of Chinese of all ages can be seen practicing *chi kung* exercises on the open public grounds. Often people practice these energy strengthening exercises for health reasons, certain exercises being especially good for specific ailments. In fact, a Torah Dojo member cured himself from intestinal cancer through the persistent practice of "chi kung".

"Torah Dojo is like a family. For me, karate is not a 'chug' or an after hours activity, but something I live twenty-four hours a day."

According to Gideon Marinovsky, the practice of *Torah Dojo* karate has not only improved his health and increased his physical power, but its benefits have penetrated into other areas of his life as well. "The study of karate gave me the courage to follow up on decisions I feel are right no matter what obstacles there are or what other people say. When I deal with colleagues and clients on a day-to-day basis, I use my karate training to assess the other person and the situation. *Torah Dojo* is like a family. For me, karate is not a *chug* or an after hours activity, but something I live twenty-four hours a day".

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