

| TRIBUTE |

# ALL ON HIS SHOULDERS



By Yisroel Besser | APRIL 22, 2020

## A general has fallen: mourning the Novominsker Rebbe



*Photos: Avraham Elbaz*

*The Novominsker Rebbe lived through many nisyonos facing Klal Yisrael, but he never gave into despair. “The Ribbono shel Olam had rachmanus,” the Rebbe would say. “So hold on tight. Hakadosh Baruch Hu is bigger and His chassadim are bigger — don’t be nispoel, don’t be intimidated.” With the Rebbe’s petirah during these challenging days, may his words serve as an anchor in the storm*

**F**rom the podium, he waved his hand, once, twice. He grimaced, as if in physical pain. “Please,” he urged, “In yenneh velt, in the Next World, they take away for such things.”

The Novominsker Rebbe wasn’t just going through the motions of rejecting honor – for him, it was like an allergic reaction.

In was 1999, and he’d just been coronated Rosh Agudath Israel, a position created to reflect his unique suitability to the time and its challenges, the fusion of gadol baTorah, leader, diplomat and, perhaps the middah that bound them all together, a chacham — such a wise man.

His talmidim, a group of alumni from the Novominsker Yeshiva, had come especially to the Agudah convention to celebrate the appointment, and they started singing “Yamim al Yemei Melech Tosif.”

Until they stopped.

Until he stopped them, actually, with his desperate plea: “Please, Rabboisai.”

Over twenty years later, in what would be his last major public appearance — before tens of thousands of people at MetLife Stadium — as the Rebbe rose to speak and again, full-throated song came forth from the sections near the floor: “Ki Orech Yamim.”

It was fitting. This was the man who carried so many of the communal problems, who’d spent decades caring, crying, but also solving, giving precious hours away to creating solutions — a man whose belief in the people he served was unshakeable, who never stopped seeing their glory even as he sometimes confronted its opposite, who never let his service to the multitudes replace his responsibility to the individual, who answered his own phone and made his own appointments and returned messages from those he did not know — “Yaakov Perlow speaking” — and so the song was right.

But even if his beard had gotten whiter, his shoulders more stooped, one thing hadn’t changed.

He waved his hand, just as he had years earlier, that same motion of disdain and discomfort, pleading with them to stop.

Acknowledgement comes in the Next World.

## Dreams for a New Decade

The Novominsker Rebbe was a rebbe before he became a rebbe, and a rosh yeshivah after he became a rebbe. And until the very end, he was a talmid.

I once had the opportunity to sit with him and he reminisced about his dear friend, Rav Shlomo Freifeld. The Rebbe, like Reb Shlomo, a child of 1930s Brooklyn and graduate of Toras Chaim elementary school, shared a memory of visiting Reb Shlomo in the hospital: There was a picture of Rav Yitzchok Hutner on the small bedside table and Reb Shlomo pointed to it and said, “At the end of the day, ich bin zeineh, I am his.”

The Rebbe expounded on the comment for me. “We learned in Yeshivas Rabbenu Chaim Berlin under Rav Hutner, but we had other influences, we moved on and took jobs and started teaching ourselves. But for all of us, Rav Hutner was the constant. Reb Shlomo was saying that whatever other influences we may have had, we viewed them through the prism created by the Rosh Yeshivah, Rav Hutner. He opened our eyes and taught us how to see.”

After his marriage to the daughter of Rav Avrohom Eichenstein, the Ziditchoiver Rebbe of Chicago, the Rebbe learned in Chaim Berlin’s kollel before moving to Chicago, where he was quickly drafted to teach Torah.

Rabbi Berel Wein remembers those early days, when the Rebbe was a maggid shiur in Beis Medrash leTorah in Skokie, Illinois – how the young Rav Perlow captivated the talmidim.

“Even though at those times he was not yet the Novominsker Rebbe, he nevertheless always exemplified to me the essence of a rebbe,” recalls Rabbi Wein, “in the way he cared for all Jews and in his unbounded optimism and good cheer. There was no student to whom he could not relate and one felt both intimate and awed in his presence at the same time.”

The silk bekeshe and untrimmed chassidic beard didn’t alienate the talmidim, but in fact drew them closer. These were objects that represented the burning ahavas Yisrael that accompanied Rabbi Perlow’s clarity in learning — and the rumors of how their rebbe had graduated Phi Beta Kappa summa cum laude from Brooklyn College only added to his appeal in the ranks of the academically-minded students.

He taught there for seven years, and it was to those halls that he brought his vision, his dreams for the next generation. Chaburas Emes was his innovation, a voluntary program for post high-school boys who wanted and deserved the chance to learn, full-time, deferring college and simply immersing themselves in Torah. He made it an experience, taking the young men who became close to him as his own children and exposing them to the wonder and depth of Torah — not as a subject, but as a way of life.

And he was there for them. The current rosh yeshivah of Skokie, Rav Avrohom Friedman, was one of those boys, and at one point he had to miss yeshivah – his mother was unwell, and he and his friends were going to the hospital to donate blood. The Rebbe didn’t just give permission. He showed up in the hospital, rolling up the sleeves of his rekel to give blood too.

The Rebbe, scion of the great dynasties of Berditchev, Stolin, Koidanov, and Lechovitz —and via his mother, the daughter of Rav Yitzchok Zelig Morgenstern of Kotzk-Sokolov, heir to that path as well — embodied the characteristics of the Poilishe rebbes: an internal fire, a laser-sharp focus on truth, and a constant demand for self-improvement and growth. And yet, his mark on the American Torah world primarily as a teacher of Torah, a gifted maggid shiur, precise, clear, and capable of giving over the joy of Torah along with its substance.

Rav Perlow’s koach didn’t go unnoticed. In 1970, the call came from New York — Yeshivas Rabbenu Shamshon Refoel Hirsch, in Washington Heights, invited him to serve as rosh yeshivah. Rav Yosef Breuer had established the kehillah with the cry of “We must have a yeshivah!”— it was its most critical need. The yeshivah flourished, and when Rav Breuer sought a rosh yeshivah for the beis medrash (the very fact that a post high-school chaburah had been formed by bochurim who wished to remain in the beis medrash full time was a testament to the yeshivah’s success), he and Rav Shimon Schwab reached out to Rabbi Perlow.

If in Skokie, Rabbi Perlow had won admiration for his scholarship and warmth, in the Breuer’s kehillah, he was revered by the wider community for his complete and total ehrlichkeit, truth not just in word but in action and attitude, emanating from his very essence. The Rebbe and Rebbetzin continued to maintain the relationships they built from their years living in Washington Heights, and one of the Novominsker Rebbe’s last public lectures was a phone shiur to this kehillah, his people in Washington Heights, as they prepared for Pesach of this year. In the epicenter of Hirschian thought, with its focus on minhag and mesorah, this chassidic rebbe was beloved.

## Cry with Them

In 1976, Rav Nochum Mordechai Perlow was niftar, and his son Rav Yaakov Perlow was crowned Novominsker Rebbe. He assumed responsibility for the beis medrash, the beloved shul he led until his last day, filling the role not just of rebbe, but of rav as well.

Though in the tradition of Poilishe rebbes he showed little of his inner life, there were times when he simply couldn’t conceal the burning passion within.

On Rosh Hashanah, his face was radiant, and when he spoke before tekios, an expression of love would inevitably burst forth from his soul.

“Daven for Yidden, for all of klal Yisrael!” he would exhort the mispalelim, his voice breaking as he said the words “Acheinu kol beis Yisrael.”

Then he would add, “And of course, have in mind our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael,” a cry of devotion to the Land and those who lived within it. (In this magazine’s first year, publisher Eli Paley and a group of editors went to receive his brachah. When they asked what the magazine’s focus should be, the Rebbe thought, and then answered. “Ahavas Eretz Yisrael,” he said, “show the chein and kedushah of Eretz Yisrael.”)

His influence was felt well beyond Boro Park: eloquent and creative, with a crisp, precise English and rich, hartizge Yiddish, he was the leading spokesman for the Torah community.

On Hoshana Rabba, he followed the minhag of his fathers and took the amud from Pesukei d’Zimra through Mussaf. In recent years, though, it was too hard for him to stand on his feet. But this year, however, he went up before Hodu and started Shacharis – and forty-five minutes later, he was still standing there, still lost in the song of Pesukei d’Zimra, so engaged that he didn’t even realize he was standing.

On this last Leil Haseder, his face took on a new glow — a man who’d seen a nation fall and rise, reveling in the message of emunah.

(Shortly before my grandfather, Rav Chaskel Besser, passed away in 2010, he spoke candidly with my father. He didn’t want an elaborate levayah, he said, and in Eretz Yisrael, there were to be no hespedim. In America, he named only a single rav, one person he felt would say what needed to be said, and perhaps more importantly, not say that which wasn’t necessary. “You know who,” my grandfather told my father, “the Rebbe.”)

The Rebbe once told me that he saw as the primary role of a gadol b’Yisrael not just to listen to Yidden, but “mit-tzuveinen,” to cry along with them, to let them know they were heard, that they had a friend who felt their pain.

In private conversations with educators and therapists, the Rebbe shared his approach: “The community of those involved in giving advice to people must utilize a major principle in their work,” he told a group. “Rashi tells us what Moshe’s job was: He felt the pain of his brothers. He didn’t just see them suffering and then look for technical solutions to mitigate the pain. First, Moshe Rabbeinu made a conscious effort to feel their pain, and only afterward did he reach the stage of finding a solution.”

The Rebbe paused then, and looked around the room before speaking again. “If you feel the pain, you can try to help,” he said.

The Rebbe and his rebbetzin had several children, among them a special needs son. When addressing events for parents in the special needs community, the Rebbe would always begin by saying, “I speak to you not as a rav and not as a lecturer... but as a parent.”

## He Saw Individuals

In 1988, the Rebbe fulfilled a long-held dream, creating a yeshivah that reflected the breadth of his own soul, a place where, in his words, “The Beis Halevi and Kedushas Levi will sit side by side on the shelf, equally cherished.”

He built the yeshivah, Kol Yehuda Novominsk, with the vision of a CEO, the selflessness of a tzaddik, the understanding of a mashgiach, and the she’ifos of a gaon.

Housed in the very same apartment building in which he lived, down the hall from his exceedingly simple apartment, the yeshivah would become the apple of his eye. In those early years, he and the Rebbetzin became parents to tens of new children, eventually hundreds.

Rebbetzin Yehudis Perlow, a social worker by training, fused the generosity and warmth of a mother with the sensitivity of a mental health professional: She “got” the bochurim, and together with her husband, created an environment that allowed them to flourish.

Educated and accomplished outside the house, a daughter of a rebbe and a wife of a rebbe, she served as the yeshivah’s first cook, seeing it as a privilege to feed these aspiring talmidei chachamim. The Rebbe was part of the yeshivah, often coming to farbreng with the boys or join them for a Shabbos seudah. He himself delivered the twelfth-grade shiur, until his doctor — who learned that the Rebbe was staying up through the night in order to prepare the shiur — insisted he stop. The Rebbe’s door was always open to the bochurim, and they were free to come in for advice or chizuk: He knew their struggles as well.

A generation later, when the yeshivah would be housed in an impressive building of its own and the Rebbe was elderly and weak, this connection still remained. There was one bochur who needed an extra boost of self-worth, and the Rebbe noticed. Whenever the Rebbe entered or left the building — and inevitably, there was always a small crowd around him — the Rebbe would stop and greet this bochur, whom he called “my friend.” At mesibos, he made sure to clap and smile when his friend danced in front of him, and when he met this bochur’s father, he always sent regards to his friend.

Even as his dream came to life — the yeshivah soared, producing bnei Torah, chassidim, talmidim who felt achrayus to Klal Yisrael — he saw not masses, but individuals.

He would meet with alumni each year on visits to Lakewood and Jerusalem: one year, in Jerusalem, the Rebbe noticed that a particular talmid, a young man who hadn’t yet been blessed with children, did not come for the annual meeting.

It was understandable: Most of those in the waiting room came to the Rebbe with their own children, eager for brachos, perhaps to cut the hair of a three-year-old boy or farther a budding talmid chacham.

The Rebbe, who well understood the situation, made the appointment just the same, asking the talmid to come. The talmid and his wife sat before the Rebbe, who listened as they described their reality.

Suddenly, the Rebbe erupted in tears, crying loudly.

“You know this isn’t my way,” the Rebbe apologized, “I don’t usually cry like this, but I can’t help it...oy...” the Rebbe burst into a fresh round of sobs, pained by what he was hearing.

The Rebbe's cries, the talmid's wife later remarked, gave her more chizuk than the brachos of others: the tzaddik's 'mit-veinen' was authentic and true.

The loss of the Rebbetzin over two decades ago was crushing for the Rebbe — their unit had been rock-solid, and he'd relied heavily on her warmth and wisdom. At the levayah, the Rebbe sent for a particular talmid, a young man who would be getting married the next night. The Rebbe had been meant to serve as mesader kiddushin. "Obviously, I won't be able to come tomorrow night," the newly bereaved husband said, "so I wanted to give you my brachos now."

## The Greatest Gift

What the Novominsker talmidim saw most of all, though, wasn't the leader, orator, activist or guide.

It was the masmid, the man whose greatest joy was to sit by the Gemara: He would come in to the beis medrash during seder, pen and notebook in hand, and sit blissfully with a Gemara and Rambam in front of him, writing and humming to himself. (In summer camp, where his schedule was freer, he could be observed learning on his porch for seven or eight hours at a stretch.)

Once a year, on Leil Shemini Atzeres, he presided over a unique ma'amad in which he would expound on the words of pesukim and express the joy and good fortune of the nation chosen to receive the Torah. He would quote from the entirety of Shas and Midrash, and then he would dance alone, holding the Sefer Torah close to his heart. Afterward he would gently kiss it and place it back in the aron kodesh, radiating humility and reverence and love for this greatest of gifts.

Once on a visit to Baltimore, the Rebbe was surrounded by throngs — this one wanted a brachah, the second had a cousin in yeshivah, the third needed advice and a fourth just wanted a picture. Uncomfortable with adulation and attention, the Rebbe's face was serious as he walked on — until one young man stopped him.

"I really enjoy learning from the Rebbe's sefer, Adas Yaakov," he said.

The Novominsker Rebbe turned to him, his face alight, his smile brilliant. "Thank you," he said with great feeling.

This was his enduring mission. To learn Torah and to teach Torah.

Every morning, he confided to a close talmid, after he recited birchos haTorah, he would speak to the Eibeshter in Yiddish, in his own words — a son talking to his heilege Tante — thanking, pleading, hoping to connect to Torah.

## Nothing but the Truth

In 1999, a few months after the passing of Rabbi Moshe Sherer, the Rebbe was tasked with a new public role as head of Agudath Israel. It was a tumultuous time for the organization and the Rebbe was uniquely suited to carry it forward — a gadol baTorah respected by the other roshei yeshivah and rebbes who were with him on the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, with the wisdom, eloquence and experience to direct the committed lay leaders as well.

Not long after, he faced personal tragedy: His rebbetzin, his partner and confidante, took ill, then passed away. Some time later, he married her sister, Rebbetzin Miriam (Landynski), who continued in the path of Rebbetzin Yehudis, allowing him to devote himself to the klal.

To the Manhattan offices of Agudath Israel, the Rebbe came bearing the words of the Maggid Mishneh at the end of Hilchos Lulav so familiar to his talmidim.

"Vayivchar be'emes mipnei shehu emes — One should choose truth, simply because it's truth."

Agudah's executive vice president Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel had ample opportunity to observe the Rebbe and his mantra.

"Both in his personal life and in his public role, the Rebbe was meticulous in his devotion to the middah of emes — scrupulous honesty, uncompromising integrity, no-shtick ehrlichkeit," Rabbi Zwiebel notes. "He would publicly speak about emes at many conventions and gatherings, but in the earlier years, he would emphasize the importance of ehrlichkeit as a means of promoting kiddush Hashem and avoiding its opposite. In more recent years though, the Rebbe shifted his emphasis. In speeches and in several private conversations I was privileged to have with him, he would quote this Maggid Mishneh, that one should choose emes simply because it's emes. Emes is not only a means through which to create kiddush Hashem. It has intrinsic value. Jews, both individually and communally, must commit to being anshei emes — because by doing so we bring glory to Hashem's Name, to be sure, but also for the simple reason that emes is emes."

His Torah was emes. His cries were emes. His smiles were emes. The soft krechtes, the sighs that you could hear as he stood like a soldier davening Shemonei Esreh, they were emes too.

He was at the pinnacle of Jewish leadership, presiding over a leading yeshivah, a powerful klal organization, a vibrant shul —and yet the private Rebbe was the same as ever, learning with hasmadah, picking up the phone to desperate Jews, listening and advising.

He raised huge sums of money for organizations; not his own yeshivah, not Agudath Israel, but whomever he felt needed it at that time, ready and willing to ask his own trusted balebatim again and again without thought of how it would affect his own mosdos.

"Alai ve'al tzavaray," he would say, "It's on me" — taking achrayus for hirings, for mergers, for mosdos launching and mosdos changing. He was firm and courageous, yet attentive and respectful.

"He would listen to sides of a dispute and rule," reflects a veteran askan, "and somehow, everyone walked out feeling comfortable: it was a flood of emes, and no one could deny it."

One day, a chassan walked in to the Rebbe's apartment, accompanied by his parents. He was meant to be married that night, but didn't feel comfortable going ahead with the marriage.

The Rebbe didn't know him or his family, but on the spot, the Rebbe canceled all appointments for the remainder of the day and locked the door. The Rebbetzin gave tzedakah and sat down to say Tehillim.

For four hours, the Novominsker Rebbe sat with them, learning the sugya of "lo levayesh es bas Yisrael," not causing public humiliation for a Yiddishe tochter. Together, they reached a decision to go ahead with the wedding. That night, a calm chassan walked down to the chuppah, establishing a beautiful home with his kallah.

The Novominsker Yeshiva spends summers in Camp Toras Chaim and the Rebbe would be taken to and from tefillos in a golf cart, driven by young bochurim who eagerly waited their turn. One young man had the zechus, and as he drove the golf cart up the path, the head counselor signaled the driver to stop.

The head counselor had a question for the Rebbe. The camp would take staff members shopping off-ground once a week, and he wanted to know if he was obligated to take them to a Jewish store, where the atmosphere was more pure, but the prices higher, or if it was fine to go to a regular supermarket.

The Rebbe asked how much the price difference was, and the head counselor conceded that it could amount to hundreds of dollars a week.

"Al pi halacha, you can take them to the supermarket," the Rebbe said, "but you should take them to the Jewish store and I will pay the difference."

The golf cart continued on its way and the Rebbe said to the driver, "You heard nothing." And as the young man parked by the Rebbe's bungalow, the Rebbe repeated his warning. "You must not repeat what you just heard," he said.

Just a few months ago, the Rebbe greeted a businessman who was a Siyum HaShas sponsor. The Rebbe acknowledged the generosity, but then asked the gentleman: "Are you also making a siyum?"

The man replied that while he did not learn daf yomi, he was learning Mesechta Megillah. The Rebbe said that he was also learning Megillah, since he wanted to join the multitudes of mesaymim by completing a mesechta of his own. He couldn't do daf yomi, but in this way, he could take part in Klal Yisrael's accomplishment.

The money he'd raised for the event, the guidance he'd given, the inspiration he'd shared, the thorny problems he'd solved weren't enough: He also needed to come bearing the emes of a blatt Gemara.

Meanwhile, the businessman forged on, journeying through the mesechta. And then Corona hit, wreaking havoc in his personal life and business, but he persevered, fueled only by the knowledge that the Novominsker Rebbe and he shared the same goal: He finally completed the mesechta, the day the Rebbe left this world, the 12th of Nissan.

## Hashem is Bigger

One day, a chassan walked in to the Rebbe's apartment, accompanied by his parents. He was meant to be married that night, but didn't feel comfortable going ahead with the marriage.

The Rebbe didn't know him or his family, but on the spot, the Rebbe canceled all appointments for the remainder of the day and locked the door. The Rebbetzin gave tzedakah and sat down to say Tehillim.

For four hours, the Novominsker Rebbe sat with them, learning the sugya of "lo levayesh es bas Yisrael," not causing public humiliation for a Yiddishe tochter. Together, they reached a decision to go ahead with the wedding. That night, a calm chassan walked down to the chuppah, establishing a beautiful home with his kallah.

The Novominsker Yeshiva spends summers in Camp Toras Chaim and the Rebbe would be taken to and from tefillos in a golf cart, driven by young bochurim who eagerly waited their turn. One young man had the zechus, and as he drove the golf cart up the path, the head counselor signaled the driver to stop.

The head counselor had a question for the Rebbe. The camp would take staff members shopping off-ground once a week, and he wanted to know if he was obligated to take them to a Jewish store, where the atmosphere was more pure, but the prices higher, or if it was fine to go to a regular supermarket.

The Rebbe asked how much the price difference was, and the head counselor conceded that it could amount to hundreds of dollars a week.

"Al pi halacha, you can take them to the supermarket," the Rebbe said, "but you should take them to the Jewish store and I will pay the difference."

The golf cart continued on its way and the Rebbe said to the driver, "You heard nothing." And as the young man parked by the Rebbe's bungalow, the Rebbe repeated his warning. "You must not repeat what you just heard," he said.

Meanwhile, the businessman forged on, journeying through the mesechta. And then Corona hit, wreaking havoc in his personal life and business, but he persevered, fueled only by the knowledge that the Novominsker Rebbe and he shared the same goal: He finally completed the mesechta, the day the Rebbe left this world, the 12th of Nissan.

Just a few months ago, the Rebbe greeted a businessman who was a Siyum HaShas sponsor. The Rebbe acknowledged the generosity, but then asked the gentleman: “Are you also making a siyum?”

The man replied that while he did not learn daf yomi, he was learning Mesechta Megillah. The Rebbe said that he was also learning Megillah, since he wanted to join the multitudes of mesaymim by completing a mesechta of his own. He couldn’t do daf yomi, but in this way, he could take part in Klal Yisrael’s accomplishment.

The money he’d raised for the event, the guidance he’d given, the inspiration he’d shared, the thorny problems he’d solved weren’t enough: He also needed to come bearing the emes of a blatt Gemara.

But the Rebbe said Shema Yisrael. He said Hashem Hu Ha’Elokim. In his passing, he sent a current of hisorerus and pain and chizuk to the people, a leader falling in the midst of a plague, giving a sense that he’d offered to go on behalf of many.

For he belonged to the people, always seeing himself as a servant to Am Yisrael, a friend to its most downtrodden.

He lived the nation’s triumphs and felt its battles and always believed in its ultimate good: as he cried out that day, just a few months ago, in his last speech to his people: “Baruch Elokeinu shebaranu lichvodo....a dank dem Ribbono shel Olam that we merited epes to honor the Torah, in some small way....yehi ratzon that we see more and more growth in Torah, and in the merit of Torah may Yidden be helped...”

That was his legacy, his testament: honor the Torah, and may Yidden be helped, the twin torches he held for so many decades.

Acknowledgement comes in the Next World, the Rebbe would say. Go, dear Rebbe, to what is yours.

## The Rebbe Couldn’t Have Written the Script Better

*Rabbi Lipa Brennan shares his inside view*

*By Yochanon Donn*

The days since the Novominsker Rebbe’s petirah have been ones of introspection for Rabbi Lipa Brennan, the longtime administrator of Yeshivah Kol Yaakov Novominsk and the Rebbe’s informal gabbai. As he tries to come to terms with the staggering loss, Rabbi Brennan is also trying to recall 32 years of interactions with a man who led by force of his love of honesty and peace.

Born in Britain — though he has not a trace of an accent — Lipa Brennan learned in Kfar Chabad, then moved to Crown Heights where he grew attached to the Lubavitcher Rebbe ztz”l. He has straddled the worlds of Polish Novominsk and Russian Lubavitch for decades.

One of the most dramatic features of the virus is that it has felled healthy people who, regardless of age, had lengthy life expectancies. The Novominsker Rebbe was 89, but was active until hours before his petirah. He was at the forefront of every issue facing Klal Yisrael. Standing at his side for so many years, Rabbi Brennan had a unique window into American Jewry’s most prominent leaders.

Just a few hours before he was niftar, the Moetzes publicized a letter of chizuk to Klal Yisrael. Agudah later said that he had been the letter’s author.

It’s not a secret anymore. He always penned the letters of the Moetzes, and then the Agudah would send the draft to the other members, who would edit or add things before the final version was issued. But the bulk of the letters were written by the Rebbe.

This letter, I think, if you read it slowly, is actually a tzavaah to the world. It’s a beautiful letter that tells people not so much what to do, but his thoughts on the situation.

### **When he opened his own yeshivah, how involved was he with the administration, the bochurim?**

He was involved in every single thing, both the gashmiyus and the ruchniyus.

### **He knew every individual bochur?**

In the earlier years he knew them on a one-on-one basis. As the yeshivah got bigger, and he got a bit older, it became more difficult for him to do that. But he always made sure to get to know the new ninth grade class. Also, every time any new bochur came into the yeshivah, the Rebbe would meet with him privately.

He would come to the yeshivah many times throughout the year to learn in the beis medrash. He would come in the morning and sit there for about an hour, learning, writing. If the hanhalah of the mesivta or the beis medrash wanted him to speak to a bochur, he was available then.

As you know, I teach writing in Novominsk. Before Chanukah I asked the boys to write a short essay about the highlights of their Chanukah. I was surprised to see that a good ten percent of them wrote that their personal highlight was when the Rebbe came to yeshivah for the mesibah. I don’t think he came this year, though.

Right. This year was a bit difficult. He had set shiurim during the year, before Pesach, for example. He would give a series of three shiurim on the Haggadah to the ninth grade. He did it this year also. The last one was about a week before he was niftar. The yeshivah was closed already but he delivered the shiur on the phone. He would learn Rus with bochurim before Shavuos. He would have chaburos with older bochurim on different topics. He had his weekly shmues in the mesivta. He would eat a seudas Rosh Chodesh with the bochurim. He would eat with them on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, after davening with the balabatim. On Purim, even this year, he ate a seudah with them on Shushan Purim.

He was very involved in the yeshivah. He was active and fulfilled until his last minute.

When I look back on the last week of the Rebbe's life, I notice that it encapsulated all his various constituencies, so to speak. He spoke with the ninth graders, as I said. On Thursday, he gave his annual shiur in Washington Heights to talmidim of Breuer's with whom he kept up with all the years. He used to go there before each major Yom Tov and give a shiur about the Yom Tov. This year it was done over the phone. On Friday he gave his Shabbos Hagadol derashah to his balabatim. He spoke by phone for an hour. On Sunday night he spoke on a conference call to over 1,000 alumni of the yeshivah. He did that every year before Pesach.

And on Monday he wrote that letter. If you read it, it's not a simple letter. It took him time, and it needed edits from other Moetzes members. It was a letter to the world.

He was taking care of Klal Yisrael. Only when he finished all of that was he niftar. That's how I look at it.

### **Why did the Rebbe open his yeshivah? Was there a specific void he wanted to fill?**

At that time, back in 1985, the main elementary yeshivahs in Boro Park were Yagdil Torah and Stolin. When the children were ready to graduate eighth grade, the balabatim on the board of Stolin, who were not Stoliner chassidim, felt that they wanted to continue the same chinuch, but they didn't want to send to a particular chassidus or go over the tracks to Flatbush. They wanted this particular blend of chassidishe warmth and a high level of learning. So they came to the Rebbe and asked him to open a yeshivah. They felt he would be able to do it.

The yeshivah itself opened as a kollel, actually. When the mesivta opened, Rabbi Dovid Kresh was chosen as menahel, a position he has held all the years.

### **What was the Rebbe's charge to those he hired for the yeshivah?**

He wanted the yeshivah to have a high standard of learning in the litvishe sense and a varmkeit to the learning and davening in the chassidishe sense. This was the atmosphere that exists in Novominsk until today. The Rebbe said in the beginning that he wants a bochur in the yeshivah to feel as comfortable with the Bais Halevi as he does with the Kedushas Levi. And he succeeded.

### **Do any of the Rebbe's interactions with the bochurim stand out in your mind?**

In the early years, the Rebbe lived on 47th Street on top of the yeshivah. He once came into the dining room and saw a bochur with a sefer during lunch. The Rebbe walked over to him and asked, "Would it be okay for you to take a walk around the block? The Gemara will be here waiting for you when you get back." The Rebbe understood this bochur needed to take a break. You can't just learn, eat, learn.

### **How did the Rebbe treat his staff at the yeshivah?**

The respect the Rebbe had for each of us was tremendous. He called me Lipa — but if there was one other person in the room, no matter who it was, it was "Rabbi Brennan." He showed this respect in all the years to all of us, to Rabbi Kresh, Rabbi Mermelstein the rosh yeshivah, and to every single rebbi. We were all part of his family and that's the way he wanted it. Our simchahs were his simchahs. He never fired anyone. We have no turnover. We have an open-door policy — you came in, you never left.

As the boys say, once a "Minsky" always a Minsky.

### **How did the Rebbe handle bochurim who didn't toe the line?**

Through love and through communication. And very often Rabbi Kresh would ask the Rebbe to speak to some bochurim. The Rebbe said recently that he learned a new word, that bochurim have "issues." They no longer have problems, today they have issues. He would say it with a smile — but he also said that we as mechanchim have to address these issues.

### **Novominsk is one of the few yeshivos that has successfully survived the recent transition of bnei Torah from Boro Park to Lakewood.**

That's right. The Eibeshter gave us a siyata d'Shmaya. In fact, at the time when this challenge was being felt throughout much of Brooklyn, our enrollment from Lakewood doubled. Now we have 20 bochurim from the ninth grade alone coming from Lakewood every week. We have a private bus for them each Friday.

### **Did the Rebbe ever talk about his childhood, his father, his past?**

The Rebbe visited the town of Novominsk, about a half hour away from Warsaw, a few times. The last time was about 25 years ago. When I later asked him if he'd lead a group of balabatim back there, he told me he didn't feel worthy of going back to see his grandfather and great-grandfather. He never went back again.

In general, though, you have to understand that the Rebbe was not a person to run to kevarim. He ran to the blatt Gemara. He ran to the shiurim. He was an unbelievable masmid. In all the years that I was with him — and I saw him in all different types of situations — I never saw him not learning or doing something for Hashem. I never saw him sitting back. He was a prolific writer. He wrote down every shiur before he said it, not to take with him to the shiur but in order to make sure he understood it himself.

From the day he became Rebbe, he filled many notebooks by writing every single derashah he said during Shalosh Seudos. That's 45 years' worth of Torah.

**I've heard many people say that the Rebbe could have had the largest levayah Boro Park has ever seen. But because of the coronavirus he barely had a minyan. Do you hear regret in the family and yeshivah?**

All I could tell you is that had the Rebbe been able to write the script, he could not have written it any better. He passed away in his seforim room, with no tumult. His levayah was conducted without a tumult.

The levayah would have been a phenomenal kiddush Hashem if the crowds had been able to attend, but it turned out to be an even greater kiddush Hashem the way it was. The Rebbe was the first yeshivah to close because of the virus. He closed Novominsk a full 24 hours before any other yeshivah and closed the shul before any other shul. A lot of yeshivos were upset at the precedent he was setting.

**People knew the Rebbe as the spokesman for Agudas Yisrael or for his yeshivah. But aside for that, he was also a chassidish Rebbe. How did that manifest itself in his life?**

The Rebbe became the Rebbe of Novominsk after his father passed away in 1976. His father, Rav Nachum Mordechai, was a Rebbe from der heim. He inherited the position from his father, Rav Alter Yisroel Shimon, the Tiferes Ish; who in turn inherited it from his father, the first Rav Yaakov Perlow, the Shufrei D'Yaakov. The Shufrei D'Yaakov was the founder of the Novominsker dynasty.

But the Rebbe never saw himself in that position of rebbe the way we look at it today. He did not lead a tish on Friday night. He would spend Shalosh Seudos in the yeshivah. He didn't have set times for people to come with a kvittel. If you had to speak to him, you called and he would let you know when to come over. He wasn't one for giving shirayim or going around with gabbaim. His concern was his talmidim, his shul, and Torah. That's all.

He had a tremendous sense of achrayus to the klal. He inherited it from his father, who was a member of the Agudah; and from his grandfather from his mother's side, the Sokolover Rebbe, who was one of the founders of Agudas Yisrael in Europe. He took this achrayus very seriously, as he did everything in his life. He would do everything all the way. If he couldn't do something properly then he wouldn't do it at all.

I'll tell you a story. In the Rebbe's private office, there are two pictures in a single frame, one of the Baal HaTanya and the other of the Vilna Gaon. And it's in one frame. Underneath, the caption says "Ha'emes vehashalom aheivu — Truth and peace love each other." This is what the Rebbe lived by. Emes and peace. If he couldn't do something properly, with emes, he wouldn't do it. If he didn't think of it as the right thing, then he wouldn't do it.

The Rebbe was someone who did everything to make peace. And he was someone who transcended labels. Litvishe, chassidishe, Sephardim, modern, non-frum — they all found that when they met the Rebbe they had a common language. The Rebbe would tell the bochurim many times the Rambam that an ehrliche person is someone "who does truth, because it is the truth." No chochmos. That approach to life trickled down to everyone who worked with or spoke to him.

**I noticed the New York Times struggled in their obituary to pin the Rebbe into an ideological corner. They write that he "straddled the Orthodox and non-Orthodox worlds," mentioning how he condemned Open Orthodoxy and Reform groups while at the same time calling for dialogue with their members.**

Yes. He had a commonality with everyone he met, Jew or non-Jew, frum or non-frum. If they took the time to meet with him they saw that he had something to offer them. He was a very educated person. He knew a lot and a phenomenal memory — things he saw when he was five years old in the 1930s and 1940s were clear by him so many decades later. People sitting shivah loved when he would be menachem avel. He would tell them stories of their parents. He had a knack for bringing stories to life.

**The Rebbe was involved in every struggle, minor or significant, that Klal Yisrael went through the past few years. I assume you had a front-row seat to that.**

Most issues in the frum world ended up by the Rebbe. The Rebbe spoke every year at the Agudah convention and Agudah dinner. If he felt that there were things that had to be said, he would use that platform to say it.

For example, there was an issue some years ago over government controls over yeshivah funding. There were some yeshivos that sadly had a less than stellar approach to that. This was causing a chillul Hashem. The Rebbe felt that it was his responsibility to bring this to the public's attention and to encourage yeshivos to be upfront about their finances. He was going to speak about this at the convention.

A day or two before he left for the convention, the Rebbe came into my office, closed the door, and sat down. He told me that he would be speaking at the convention about this topic. "Before I speak about yeshivos doing things 100 percent the way it should be done," the Rebbe told me, "I have to know that my yeshivah is up to that standard. So I'm asking you, is our yeshivah up to the standard that I'm going to speak about?"

I answered him, jokingly, "Based on the Eibeshter's standards, I have no problem. The Rebbe's standard? I'm not sure." Because I understood how much it meant to the Rebbe that we have to be beyond the letter of the law. Throughout the year, I saw that as part of our mandate, because of who the Rebbe is. We cannot be just okay. We have to be better than okay. Because in everything that we do, we represent the Rebbe. We have to be an example to the world.

(Originally featured in Mishpacha, Issue 807)