

# Remembering Rabbi Mordechai Gifter

זכר צדיק לברכה

## *A Melamed For All Times*

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The recent passing of Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, זכר צדיק לברכה, the Telshe *Rosh Hayeshiva*, this past 23 Teves/January 18, was not only a time of mourning, but an occasion to contemplate the many aspects of greatness that marked this unique Torah personality.

The memorial page in the previous issue of *The Jewish Observer* listed the salient facts: born 85 years ago to Reb Yisroel and Mrs. Gifter in Portsmouth, Virginia, later moving to Baltimore, eventually going to Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchak Elchonon after his *bar mitzva*. Inspired to learn in the Telshe Yeshiva in Lithuania, he left America at age 17. Indeed, after a few arduous years, he was recognized to be a quintessential Telzer in outlook, in remarkable dedication to Torah, and even in manner of expression.

He had an unusual affinity to *Gedolei Yisroel*, and during the years of his youth, he had close relationships with Rabbi Moshe Soloveitchik זצ"ל; the Telzer Rav, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch הי"ד; his eventual father-in-law, Rabbi Zalman Bloch הי"ד; as well as Rabbi Mordechai ("Reb Mot-tel") Pogromansky זצ"ל.

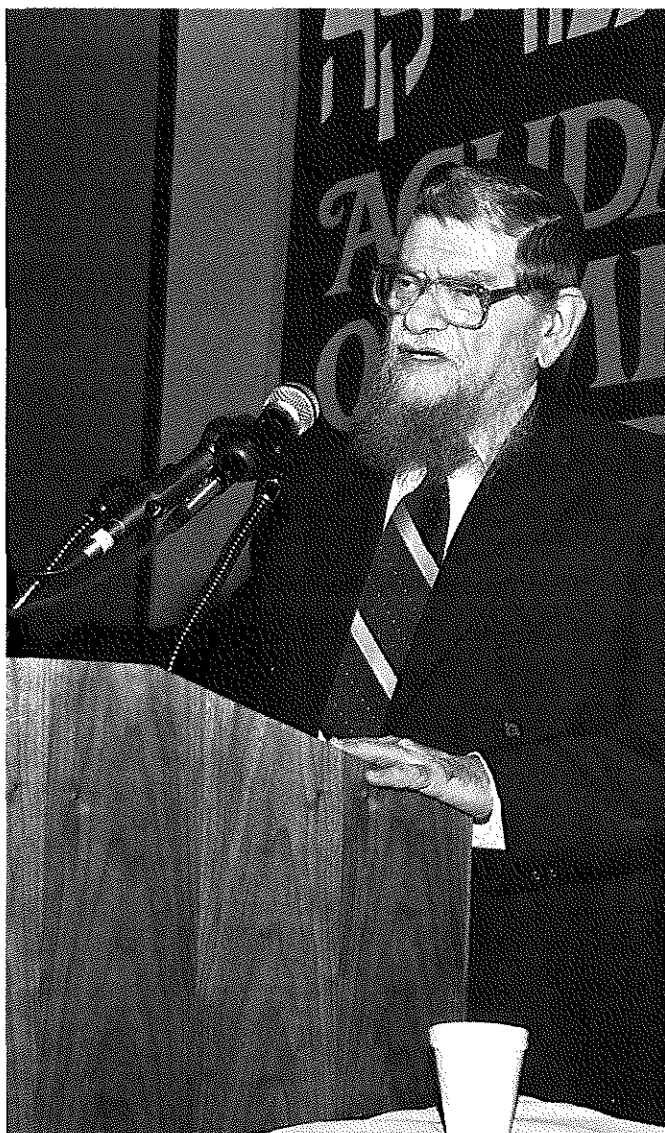
After six years of intensive learning in Europe, he returned to America, and soon afterward, married his *Rebbetzin*, the former Shoshana Bloch, שרתחי. He served as a *Rav* in Baltimore, moving on to Connecticut, where

he served for close to five years – years marked by intensive Torah study, as before. Summoned by the Telzer *Roshei Yeshiva* – Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch זצ"ל and Rabbi Mordechai Katz זצ"ל – he joined them in the fledgling Yeshiva of Telshe in Cleveland, Ohio, eventually as *Rosh Yeshiva* (with Rabbi Baruch Sorotzkin זצ"ל) until his passing, except for two years, from 1977 to 1979, when he founded Yeshiva Telshe-Stone near Yerushalayim.

He was an outstanding *talmid chacham*, as well as a bold and visionary leader and articulate spokesman for *Klal Yisroel* – primarily through Agudath Israel of America, which he served as a member of its *Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah* (Council of Torah Sages).

Most of all, however, he made his mark as a dedicated *melamed Torah* to his *talmidim*... a teacher of Torah to generations of disciples, as the article that follows delineates.

He leaves behind his devoted *Rebbetzin*, six children and their families – Rabbi and Mrs. Binyamin Gifter (Brooklyn), Rabbi and Mrs. Zalman Gifter (Wickliffe), Rabbi and Mrs. Yisroel Gifter (Lakewood), Rabbi and Mrs. Ephraim Eissenberg (Baltimore), Rabbi and Mrs. Avrohom Chaim Feuer (Monsey), and Rabbi and Mrs. Yaakov Reisman (Far Rockaway) and their children and grandchildren. NW



## PRINCE OF THE TORAH RENAISSANCE

I first entered the *Beis HaMidrash* of Telshe Yeshiva in 1962 at the age of sixteen. I had never heard of Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, so I asked someone who he was. His response was, "I think that he was best described by an out-of-town rabbi who introduced Rabbi Gifter as 'The Prince of the Torah Renaissance in America.'" After learning from him in the Yeshiva for seventeen years and being close to him as his son-in-law for thirty-four years, I am certain that that title is a most appropriate description of this unique *Gadol B'Yisroel*.

The dictionary defines renaissance as a renewal, a rebirth. For all practical purposes, in the first half of the twentieth century, Torah study and genuine Torah life was well nigh dead. In the second half of the twentieth century the *Ribbono Shel Olam* blessed American Jewry with an amazing revival of Torah study and Torah life. The great Torah leaders who were *Hashem's* emissaries in accomplishing this turnaround are well known to us and to them we are eternally grateful. Yet Rabbi Gifter played a singular role in this renaissance and made a unique contribution. And we American-born-and-bred boys in Telshe were the beneficiaries of his contribution.

Rabbi Feuer, who serves as *Rav* of Kehillas Bais Avrohom of Monsey, NY, is author of numerous books on Torah themes, most recently, *The Tzedakah Anthology* (ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications).

We entered *mesivta* high school with our eyes on eventually moving on to institutions of higher education – university. He raised our sights to aspire for yet higher education, following the curriculum of the Master *Melamed*, *Hashem* Himself. As a result we experienced a renaissance, a profound awakening on a spiritual level, thanks to his ability to talk to us as someone who – born in Portsmouth, Virginia – could relate to our struggles and our

and the glory of Torah.

In this brief tribute we will attempt to touch some of the aspects of this masterpiece.

## THE MELAMED

My revered *Rebbe*, my beloved father-in-law, the Telzer *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, always said that he disliked the prestigious title "*Rosh Yeshiva*" and much preferred to be known as a "*melamed*," a simple teacher of Torah. Why? Because the Master of the Universe, *Hashem* Himself, is described in the *Birkas HaTorah*, the blessing over Torah study, as "*Hamelamed Torah L'amo Yisroel*," He Who teaches Torah to His nation, Israel. "If that title is good enough for the *Rib-*



Rabbi Gifter walking with Rabbi Chaim Stein שליט"א and Rabbi Mordechai Katz שליט"א. In the background, Rabbi Nachum Perlow שליט"א, previous Novominsker Rebbe.

capacity for growth. And he did this with the royalty of a true *talmid chacham*: "*Mann malka rabbanan* – Who truly possess majesty? The *Rabbanan*." (*Gittin* 62a)

The *Gemora* (*Megilla* 3b) teaches that *Kavod HaTorah*, giving honor to the Torah, surpasses *limud HaTorah*, the study of Torah, because when people see how important Torah is, they will be inspired to study it more. *Hashem* blessed Rabbi Gifter with many admirable talents that no one else could duplicate. When you put all of those talents together, there emerged a masterpiece of a man whose entire being evoked a sense of the majesty

*bono Shel Olam*, it's good enough for me!" said Rabbi Gifter.

In the fifty five years that Rabbi Gifter served at Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, he truly was a *melamed* par excellence to thousands of students from diverse backgrounds, hailing from every point on the globe.

Truth to be told, none of us, his *talmidim*, ever viewed him as the simple *melamed* he strove to be. If ever there was anyone who projected the idealized image of an impressive *Rosh Yeshiva*, it certainly was he. Rabbi Gifter was a profound *lamdan* of the highest order; a

true genius whose powerful mind never stopped thinking in learning, whose pure mouth never tired of speaking in learning, and from whose prolific pen flowed a never ending torrent of Torah writing. He was a man of truth who despised falsehood, flattery and frivolity. A brilliant, compelling orator in Yiddish, English and *Loshon Hakodesh*, he literally kept his audiences spellbound as he delivered addresses that would never be forgotten. Merely standing in his presence was awesome – because you

knew that you were standing in the presence of genuine greatness. The last thing Rabbi Mordechai Gifter seemed to be was a simple, ordinary *melamed*.

But now that our *Rebbe* is gone and we reminisce and recollect our fond memories of him, we realize that at the very core of his being, all of his talents and achievements emanated from his overriding ambition to be a *melamed* worthy of transmitting Hashem's Torah to this generation, in the unique fashion which these times require.

#### "MY MIND IS ON THEM"

Invariably, when he would address convocations of Torah educators, he would cite the *Gemora* (*Bava Basra* 8b) that describes the master *melamed*, Rav Shmuel bar Shilas, who set the Talmudic standard for elementary level Torah teachers. This skillful and dedicated teacher was under the constant guidance of the *gadol hador*, the great Talmudic giant, Rav. The *Gemora* relates how Rav was once quite shocked to find his disciple, Rav Shmuel, resting in the comfort of his garden on a regular school day while classes were in session. "What has happened to you, Rav Shmuel?" the bewildered Rav asked, "have you forsaken your customary devotion and loyalty to your students?"

To which Rav Shmuel responded, "Believe me, *Rebbe*, that this is a long overdue rest which I desperately need. I have not been in this garden for thirteen years! And even now as my exhausted body is getting some much needed rest, my brain is still thinking about my students and *daati ilovayhu*, my mind is on them."

In reference to this, Rabbi Gifter observed, "Over the ages, countless volumes have been written attempting to teach the science of education. Believe me, everything that can be said on this subject is summed up in the pithy, two-word statement of Rav Shmuel bar Shilas, '*daati ilovayhu*, my mind is on them!' Any teacher who sincerely cares about his students and gives them serious thought will be blessed to find the proper approach to influence and educate them!"

With this in mind, he would say over an idea he heard in the name of the *Chazon Ish*. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Eliezer Gordon developed the Telzer Yeshiva into one of the most effective *yeshivos* in Lithuania. Someone once asked the *Chazon Ish* if he could explain the secret of Rabbi Gordon's extraordinary achievement. He observed, "Reb Leizer has a yeshiva filled with over four hundred *bachurim*, yet he feels that each and every one of them is his *ben yachid*, his one and only son,

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and he treats them accordingly!"

#### LOVE WITHOUT PAMPERING

Rabbi Gifter cared very deeply about his students, yet he did not pamper them. To the contrary, he felt that pampering was counter-productive to their education. He demanded diligence and single-minded dedication to laboring in Torah. His rich Yiddish vocabulary contained numerous terms to express the idea that one must exert and exhaust himself to comprehend any and every Torah concept. *Mir darfen horaven, matteren, muchenen zich tzu farshtein der dvar Hashem!* As much as Rabbi Gifter was an outstanding master of the English language, he felt that he was unable to find the proper English words to adequately translate the above Jewish terms.

Rabbi Gifter emphasized time and again that the main purpose of a teacher is to teach students how to think for themselves, not to spoon-feed them with answers. He cited the *Gemora* (*Chullin* 12a) which relates that a student once posed a question to his *Rebbe*, Rav Nachman, to which Rav Nachman's gave a very strange response: "I will only provide you with an answer if you first provide me with a large measure of salt!"

Rabbi Gifter explained that Rav Nachman had a full appreciation for his disciple's intellectual capacity and knew that he was perfectly capable of coming up with the right answer on his own. The student, however, failed to think intensely and preferred to let his *Rebbe* do the laborious thinking for him. Therefore, Rav Nachman employed the metaphor of salt to illustrate his point. Salt is not tasty on its own, yet it enhances the taste of edibles because it draws out the hidden flavor that is locked deep inside the food. Rav Nachman said, "You, my dear student, are perfectly capable of exerting your mind to answer this question. If you want me to do the thinking for you, you are making me into a mere sack of salt, because you want me to

## INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

ידה הארצית



extract the 'flavor' and squeeze out the reasoning for you!"

#### SITTING BEFORE THE REBBE IN AWE

A student who is in awe of his *Rebbe* when he is in his *Rebbe's* presence, will remember to think and act like his *Rebbe* even after he leaves his presence. Thus, the *halacha* requires

that at the Pesach *seder* the men are supposed to recline (*heseiba*) at certain times to demonstrate that they are truly free and can eat in a relaxed, lounging posture. *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 472:5) rules that a student should sit in awe before his *Rebbe*, so he may not recline in his presence. Indeed, in this regard, it is considered irreverent to lounge in front of one's teacher. If the

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*Rebbe* grants his student special permission, he may recline in his presence. A son, however, may always recline in the presence of his father, even if his father is his *Rebbe*, because a father usually grants his beloved son permission to do so.

The very first Pesach after I married my *Rebbe's* daughter and became his son-in-law, I sat at his *seider* table. I asked Rabbi Gifter if I now had the status of his son so that I could recline by the *seider*. He replied, "Of course I love you like a son, but my primary relationship to you is that of a *Rebbe*. A student gains tremendously by sitting in awe in the presence of his *Rebbe*. I do not wish to deprive you of that. If I give up my status of *Rebbe* towards you, you will be that much poorer. I really don't want you to suffer such a heavy loss, so I think it's better for you not to recline!"



Rabbi Gifter with Rabbi Aharon Kotler and Rabbi Eliezer Silver זכרונם לברכה

#### HE SHARED HIS SOUL WITH US

Rabbi Gifter taught us that the fundamental rule of all effective Torah teaching is that it is insufficient to merely communicate the thoughts that come from our head.

Rather, we must open up our hearts and share the feelings that flow from our soul, the core of our innermost being. How vividly do his *talmidim* recollect how he would recite the words of the following Midrash, which demonstrates how the Master *Melamed*, the *Ribbono Shel Olam*, teaches Torah.

"For Hashem gives away knowledge; from His mouth emanate wisdom and deep understanding" (*Proverbs* 2,6). Knowledge is of great value, and G-d gives it away to all men. However, wisdom and deep understanding are much greater gifts, for G-d personally reserves these gifts for those whom He loves very much, as it says, "...from His mouth emanate wisdom and deep understanding."

Rabbi Yitzchak said: "This concept may be illustrated with the allegory of the great king whose little boy came home from school and saw a large tray of food placed in front of his royal father. The doting father took a piece of food from the tray and gave it to his son to eat. But the son refused to accept it, saying, 'No! This is not what I want! I only wish to eat from the very same piece that you, father dear, are eating! I want to eat from the food that you are putting into your own mouth!' Because the king loved his son so much, he shared with him the very same piece of food he had bitten into with his own mouth. Similarly, G-d generously grants general knowledge and information to all of mankind, but with His Chosen Nation, Israel, He

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shares the intimate wisdom and deep understanding of the Torah which come from His own mouth."

Rabbi Gifter elaborated on the lesson of the Midrash: The king already had distributed food to the members of his court before his son arrived. They were all quite satisfied with their portions, because they were only interested in the nourishing food. The king's beloved son, however, wasn't hungry for a portion of food. He yearned for fatherly love to satisfy his soul. *Ehr hott gevolt ufessen der tatte alein!* His primary craving was to "eat up" his cherished parent. The closest he could get to that was to eat the food that came straight from his father's mouth.

Similarly, there are two approaches to Torah study. Some students study only with their head. For them, *limud HaTorah* is a purely intellectual pursuit. G-d will not send them away empty-handed, and He will grant them knowledge. But the students who really love G-d study for more than merely filling their heads with knowledge. Their primary goal is to cling to the Almighty and to enter into a close relationship with Him. With these devotees, G-d shares true wisdom and deep insight, which emanate from His own mouth.

In the same vein, Rabbi Gifter observed, there are those who teach Torah in a detached manner. They merely "give away" their accumulated information and knowledge to their class, but they fail to share their hearts and souls with them. They will not succeed to the fullest. The inspired *Rebbe*, the *melamed* who emulates G-d, opens up and shares his very essence with his disciples. He gives the very same *shiur* as the detached teacher, but his words are not from the head but from the heart. This *melamed* will capture both the minds and the hearts of his students forever.

Rabbi Gifter was richly blessed with a variety of extraordinary talents and unique qualities of character, but his outstanding feature was the sincerity, energy, and passion he invested into every word he uttered. It made no dif-

ference whether he spoke publicly before an audience of thousands or conversed privately with a solitary individual; he always spoke with passion and shared his heart with you. No wonder his words always left an indelible imprint on all who heard them!

Not only did the words flowing from his lips leave their mark, the kisses of his lips had a power of their own. At the end of every *shiur*, as he carefully and somewhat reluctantly closed his *Gemora*, Rabbi Gifter would bend over his cherished tome and give it a big,

resounding kiss. This kiss was so full of tender love and yearning that it spoke volumes, and constituted an entire *shiur* on its own.

One *talmid* related that when he was a fledgling teenager in high school he was going through a difficult period, discouraged and plagued with doubts. His learning was suffering and he felt very down. One day, Rabbi Gifter delivered a *shiur* to his class, and when he concluded, he gave his *Gemora* his customary kiss. The *talmid* says that there was so much *ahavas Torah*, pure *emuna*,

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and positive energy in that one kiss, that it dispelled all of his doubts and gloom, and infused him with so much love for Torah that he has not left the *Beis Hamidrash* to this very day, almost fifty years later! *May He kiss me with the kisses of His mouth, for your love is dearer to me than fine wine (Shir Hashirim 1,2).*

#### CUSTOM-TAILORED TORAH

**R**abbi Gifter cherished the close relationship he enjoyed with his *Rebbe Muvhak*, his prime *Rebbe*, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch ז"ל, the *Rav* and *Rosh Yeshiva* of Tel-sai before World War II. The Telzer *Rosh HaYeshiva* came to America on a fund-raising trip in the middle of the 1930's when young Mordechai Gifter was in high school. Rabbi Gifter was always eager to make the acquaintance of *Gedolei Yisroel*, so he traveled to the Lower East Side of Manhattan on many a *Motza'ei Shab-*

*bos* to hear Torah from Rabbi Bloch. Rabbi Gifter was so mesmerized by this *Gadol*, that he decided to learn in Lithuania as soon as he finished high school. Finally, at the age of seventeen, he made the long and arduous journey overseas.

The new student in Telshe pursued his studies with great diligence and quickly earned himself the title, *the Amerikaner Iluy* (genius). He spent much time "speaking in learning" with the *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Bloch, and would not miss his *shiurim* for anything.

In his capacity as *Rav* of Telshe, Rabbi Bloch would periodically deliver important *drashos* in the main *Beis Hamidrash* of the city. Not only did the *baalei bat-tim* of the city eagerly attend these sermons, but the best *yeshiva bachurim* also came to hear their *Rebbe* speak; they did not want to lose any opportunity to benefit from their *Rebbe's* wisdom. The only devoted student of the *Rav* and *Rosh*

*HaYeshiva* who failed to attend these *drashos* was young Rabbi Gifter, who would not budge from his *Gemora*.

The *Rebbe* wanted his *talmid* to gain from these important lectures, so he asked him, "Why do you absent yourself from these *drashos*?" When telling over this story, Rabbi Gifter would preface his account by saying that at that time he was still young and impetuous, and had not properly studied *Mussar*. He answered, "Frankly, I don't think it's worthwhile to interrupt my study of *Gemora* for this."

To this the *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rabbi Bloch tersely replied, "*D'milsah albishay-hu yakira*, A garment of fine wool is precious to the one who wears it."

The *Rosh HaYeshiva* was referring to the *Gemora (Shabbos 10b)* that relates how Rav Chisda was an exceptionally devoted disciple of his *Rebbe*, the great *Amora*, Rav. Once, Rav Chisda held two precious gift items in his two hands and called out, "If anyone comes and tells me a new teaching in the name of my revered *Rebbe*, Rav, I will give him these two precious gifts!"

Rava bar Mechasya stepped forward and said over a new teaching of Rav, and Rav Chisda immediately handed over the two gifts to him. Rava bar Mechasya was very impressed by this devotion, and asked, "Are the teachings of Rav really so dear to you?"

Rav Chisda enthusiastically replied, "Yes!"

Rava bar Mechasya observed, "Your appreciation reflects yet another teaching of Rav who said, '*D'milsah albishay-hu yakira*, A garment of fine wool is particularly precious to the one who usually wears it.'" [A particular type of garment is more valuable to a person accustomed to wearing such garments than to anyone else. Likewise, Rav's teachings are especially precious to you, because you, being his devoted student, are much accustomed to them (*Rashi*)]. Rav Chisda exclaimed, "Rav actually said that! This teaching is worth more to me than the first one! If I were holding another set of valuable gifts, I would gladly give them to you as well!"



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Rabbi Gifter recollected that this piece of *Mussar* made a profound impression upon him, and literally changed his life. He realized then and there that the student who takes his *Rebbe's* teachings lightly betrays his own immaturity. To truly appreciate a *Rebbe*, one must be a *maven*, i.e. a connoisseur, who has cultivated a taste for something highly sophisticated. The student must prepare to change himself dramatically in order to think and feel and experience life through the perspective of his *Rebbe* and guide. The student-*Rebbe*

connection is a most intimate and personal relationship that demands that the student surrender his head and his heart to his teacher. He must spend a great deal of time listening to the *Rebbe*, observing him in all types of situations. Ultimately, the student becomes so familiar with his *Rebbe* that at every occasion he will ask himself, "How

would my *Rebbe* react here? What would he think? What would he say?"

As one wears a garment of soft material more and more, it slowly begins to change its original shape and conforms to the unique body-contours of the wearer. Similarly, as one pays more and more attention to his *Rebbe's* words, he reconfigures the contours of his mind so that they take on the distinct shape of his teacher's thought process.

Rabbi Gifter testified that from the moment his beloved *Rosh HaYeshiva* gave him that well-deserved dose of *Mussar*, he never missed an opportunity to hear

a *drasha* from his *Rebbe*. Whenever the Telzer Rav would deliver a *drasha* for *baalei battim* in the main Beis Midrash of the town, even on a weekday, his young student, Rabbi Gifter, would don his *Shabbos* clothing in honor of the event, and make sure to attend the lecture.

#### DESIGNER GARMENTS FOR THE MIND AND THE SOUL

**R**abbi Gifter had a treasure trove of anecdotes that illustrated the unique qualities of the master



With Rabbi Yaakov Y. Ruderman, in Camp Agudah, Ferndale, NY

*melamed*. The following was one of his favorites:

Rav Meshullam Iggra, Rav of Tysmienitza and Pressburg (immediately preceding the Chasam Sofer), was universally acclaimed as an extraordinary genius of the highest caliber. His devoted disciple was the young Yaakov Lorberbaum, later to become the renowned Rav of Lissa and author of many classics such as the Nesivos Hamishpat, Chavos Daas et al. Once Reb Yaakov posed a very serious question to his teacher. "Rebbe, I am deeply perplexed. Often, the *Rebbe's* amazing shiurim, are so profound that I cannot

understand them. Yet, when I study the commentary of the Rashba, who lived some six centuries ago in faraway Spain, I do comprehend what he is saying. How can it be that I understand the Rashba who was a Rishon, a giant of an entirely different time, yet I cannot understand the *Rebbe*, who is standing right in front of me and is speaking directly to me in my language?"

Reb Meshullam replied, "Indeed, that is the greatness of the Rishonim. They knew how to wrap all of their words in well-fitting garments!"

Rabbi Gifter explained this cryptic response: A relatively small person has a narrow field of vision and is only capable of viewing the world or its inhabitants from his limited, personal vantage-point. A greater person is far more broad-minded and enjoys a much wider perspective. He has the ability to see a subject from many different angles. Thus,

when he elucidates a subject, he explains it in a comprehensive fashion that will make sense to a variety of people who are on vastly different intellectual levels. Thus, the great Rashba was able to skillfully wrap his commentary in verbal and intellectual "garments," which people on many levels could comprehend and relate to.

If a teacher is to reach his students successfully, he must not speak to them from a narrow, personal vantagepoint. He must use his ingenuity to wrap his words in intellectual "garments" appropriate for his audience.

Rabbi Gifter illuminated this concept



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with the teaching of the *Rambam* in his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*. *Rambam* describes in great detail how the Torah was scrupulously transmitted from generation to generation, beginning with Moshe at Sinai and culminating with the completion of the Babylonian Talmud in the days of Rav Ashi. In every generation, the leading rabbi would entrust the complete Oral Tradition to his primary disciple and charge him with the responsibility of transmitting it to the next generation.

In his itemized listing of forty generations of transmitting Torah from master to disciple, the *Rambam* states that the great Hillel entrusted the tradition to his disciple, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. This is puzzling because the *Gemora* (*Succa* 28a) relates that Hillel had eighty distinguished disciples, the greatest of whom was Rabbi Yonason ben Uziel, while the smallest of all eighty was none other than Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. Why did Hillel entrust the transmission of the *Mesorah* to his smallest disciple rather than to his greatest disciple, Rabbi Yonason ben Uziel?

Rabbi Gifter explained that the *Baal Mesorah* who is designated to transmit the tradition from one generation to another is not necessarily the *greatest* rabbi and scholar; rather, he is the one who best makes the transition from the previous generation to the present one. This is the person who can appreciate and comprehend the greatness of the earlier generation, and then turn around and customize these teachings to fit the diminished level of the contemporary world, without compromising the authenticity of our tradition. Precisely because Rabbi Yonason ben Uziel was so great, he could not lower himself to the level of the next generation.

On that very same page, the *Gemora* vividly describes the awesome power of Rabbi Yonason. When he was engaged in pure Torah study, a pillar of fire emanated from him so that any bird that flew overhead was instantly consumed in flames. *Meiri* (*Introduction to Commentary on Pirkei Avos*) says that we

may interpret this statement allegorically. The “bird” represents a frivolous Torah insight that has no solid basis or foundation in text or tradition. The rational, well-disciplined Torah mentality of Rabbi Yonason could not tolerate such flights of fancy. His razor-sharp intellect instantly demonstrated how and why the flighty Torah insight was untenable. In this fashion the pure flame of Rabbi Yonason’s truth incinerated the wild, ‘*tzuflogeneh*’ idea.

Rabbi Yonason was awesome, but his greatness was too much for his contemporaries. It was the smallest disciple, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who was close enough to the level of his contemporaries to be able to convey the Torah in a fashion most suitable for them.

In this vein, Rabbi Gifter would relate that Rabbi Mordechai Pogromansky had observed that the learning method of the Rogatchover Gaon resembled a sweeping storm, whereas the brilliant analytical style of Rabbi Chaim Brisker was like the calm following the storm. The deep, penetrating method of Reb Chaim was more appropriate and satisfying for our generation, and therefore became universally accepted and revered.

## THE PATIENCE OF RAV PREIDA

Rabbi Gifter had a unique approach to the words of *Chazal*, when extracting brilliant, original lessons from their words. Once, he shared with me a novel explanation for the *Gemora* (*Eruvin* 54b) that tells of an exceptionally devoted teacher:

Rav Preida had a student to whom he would have to repeat a lesson four hundred times before he understood it. One day Rav Preida was required to leave the House of Study to attend to a pressing *mitzva* matter. Before leaving, he taught his student the lesson the usual four hundred times, but still the student failed to grasp the lesson. Rav Preida asked him why he failed to grasp the lesson. The student replied, “From the very moment they told the master that there is an urgent *mitzva* matter to attend to, my attention was

diverted, because every moment I said to myself, Now the master will be getting up to leave, now the master will be getting up to leave!"

Rav Preida said, "Pay attention now and I will teach the lesson to you all over again!"

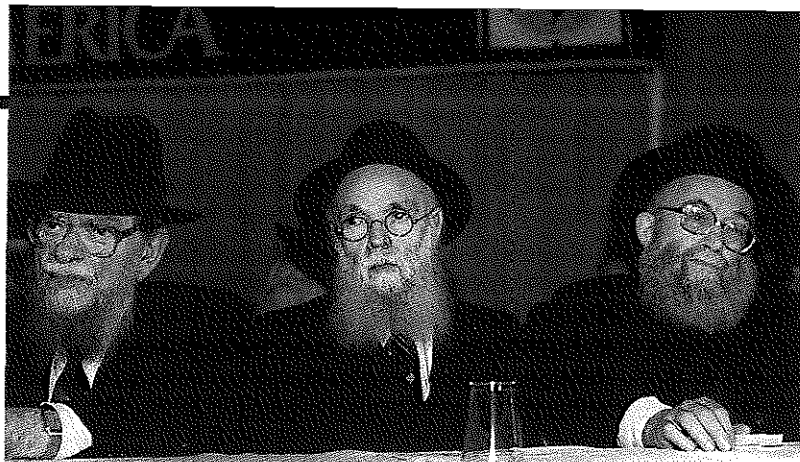
He repeated the lesson another four hundred times. A heavenly voice emanated and asked Rav Preida, "As a reward for such devotion do you wish that four hundred years be added to your life, or do you wish that you and all of your generation merit the life of the World to Come?"

Rav Preida replied, "That I and my generation merit the life of the World to Come."

The Holy One, Blessed is He, said to them, "Grant him both this reward and that reward!"

Rabbi Gifter asked, "Who was this student who required such Herculean effort on the part of his teacher? Was he actually dull or slow or mentally impaired? If the studies are beyond the mental grasp of the student, even four hundred repetitions won't help him. And for a slow learner, five or even ten times should be enough. Indeed, Rav Preida would not be obligated to teach such a student on a regular basis. He was a *Rosh Yeshiva* running a conventional yeshiva. Rather, Rav Preida's student was an exceptionally gifted young man blessed with an extraordinary intellect. Every time Rav Preida delivered a *shiur* for the Yeshiva, the probing mind of this *bachur* would come up with all kinds of challenging, penetrating questions. So Rav Preida would patiently go through the entire *shiur* with him once again. But that didn't satisfy this young man. His thirst for absolute clarity and truth was not slaked. So he asked yet more questions. And Rav Preida went over the subject again, and again, and yet again – until he repeated it four hundred times!

This is the level of devotion that a *melamed Torah* can achieve when he rec-



Rabbi Gifter with Rabbi Pam and Rabbi Svei at an Agudath Israel Convention

ognizes his absolute obligation to transmit the Torah to the next generation on the highest level. A *Rosh HaYeshiva* has no right to merely stand up in front of his students and tell them what's on his mind. He has a Divine mandate to give over to his students all that he knows *as clearly as he himself knows it!* Even if it takes four hundred reviews to achieve that level of clarity – so be it.

"O, HOW I LOVE YOUR TORAH!"

*O how I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation (Tehillim 119,97).*

Many of us knew that Rabbi Gifter had a special feeling for this verse, which he whispered fervently after each and every *Shemoneh Esrei*; the Hebrew version begins with the first letter of his name, "Mem," and

ends with the last letter of his name, "Yud." However, our *Rebbe* once revealed an even deeper bond to this verse when he taught it to us in the context of the *Gemora* (*Menachos* 18a):

The Talmud records that the great Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi was reminiscing about his youth, when he went to study in the Yeshiva of the *Tanna*, Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua. "When I arrived, I found a certain student named Yoseif the Bavli for whom the *Rosh HaYeshiva* had an extraordinary love; indeed he loved him 'ad achas', i.e. like the one and only." *Tosafos* explains

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this to mean that Rabbi Elazar loved his disciple like his very own soul! The soul has five levels, the highest of which is called “*yechida*,” i.e. the one and only. Thus, the souls of the teacher and the student were bound at the very essence of their being!

The *Gemora* proceeds to describe how such an intense and intimate bond was forged. One morning Yoseif posed a halachic question to Rabbi Elazar, and his response was, “It is kosher!” In the evening Yoseif repeated his query, and the rabbi’s response was the same, “It is kosher!” The next morning, the scenario was repeated with the same response, “Kosher!” It was repeated once again at mid-day and the response was, “Kosher!” In the late afternoon, Yoseif asked the question once again, but this time Rabbi Elazar replied, “It is kosher, but there is one lone opinion that rules that it is not kosher!”

Upon hearing this, Yoseif’s face lit up with an intense glow of genuine joy. The Rabbi asked the student to explain why he was so overjoyed, and Yoseif the Bavli replied, “Dear *Rebbe*, I had once heard that there was one lone opinion that held that the ruling here was ‘not kosher,’ but since the *Rebbe* didn’t reference it, I thought that I made a mistake and that there was a flaw in my learning. Now that the *Rebbe* made mention of that opinion, I feel as if the *Rebbe* has returned to me a precious, long-lost article.”

Tears of joy poured forth from Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua’s eyes, and he exclaimed, “How very fortunate you are, you devoted Torah scholars who cherish words of Torah so very much! It was with the likes of you in mind

that King David sang, ‘*How I love Your Torah! All day long it is my conversation*’” (*Tehillim* 119,97).

Rabbi Gifter explained how no bond of love surpasses the unique attachment that links the *Rebbe* with his *talmid*. Other human relationships are based on physical and material considerations, which are born of this world, but this relationship is a bonding of two souls



who share a common love and passion for Torah, which is completely spiritual, beyond the confines of this world.

That was the kind of love Rabbi Gifter had for his *talmidim*. But, in all honesty, his love was so out of the ordinary, that many of us failed to appreciate it. We were American boys and we were trained to believe that to be loved means to be spoiled and pampered and fussed over. Only now, in retrospect, do we begin to realize the true meaning and majesty of our *Rebbe*’s feelings for us.

#### ALL THE WORLD WAS HIS CLASSROOM; ALL OF MANKIND, HIS TEACHERS

*From all my teachers I grew wise, for Your clear testimonies are my conversation* (*Tehillim* 119,99).

When Rabbi Gifter taught this verse to us, a group of *bachurim*, members of a *Tehillim Vaad*, were sitting around his dining room table on a weekday evening. He

loved teaching the Psalms with the commentary of *Rashi* and *Midrash Tehillim*. On the above verse, *From all my teachers I grew wise*, *Rashi* observes: “I learnt a little bit from this teacher and a little bit from that teacher – but first I studied from one *Rebbe Muvhak*, a primary teacher whose approach to learning and way of thinking was indelibly imprinted on my mind.” Rabbi Gifter explained that the stu-

dent whose scholastic career consists of jumping from yeshiva to yeshiva, and from *Rebbe* to *Rebbe* to glean scraps of interesting information is merely an intellectual dabbler, a shallow dilettante. Moreover, he is likely to be confused by the divergent viewpoints and opinions of the variety of teachers. Therefore, in the very next verse the Psalmist emphasizes: *From elders I gain deep insight, for I have learnt to cherish your teachings*, i.e. to be

capable of learning from all men, I must first *gain deep insight from elders* who transmit to their disciples an iron-clad tradition, a *hashkafa*, that provides a clear frame of reference through which to systematically evaluate and integrate all subsequent knowledge into a coherent body of wisdom.

When an outstanding *Rebbe* successfully trains his disciple to have an all-encompassing Torah outlook, the student discovers the divine everywhere he looks. No aspect of human existence is base or vulgar to him, because every detail of creation testifies to G-d’s greatness. Therefore, *Your clear testimonies are my conversation*, i.e. every man has become my teacher because I gain real wisdom from every encounter in life.

Rabbi Gifter thus often cited lessons from the world of science or physics that gave him a deeper insight into Torah. He once read an article about Albert Einstein’s life and lessons. Therein, Einstein

explained the unique physical properties of water molecules, which form an exceptionally strong bond with one another on the surface of any body of water. This is known as "molecular bonding – surface adhesion"; the bond at the surface is actually stronger than the bond of the water molecules beneath the surface. I remember how Rabbi Gifter shared this scientific concept with me with great excitement, because this actually helped him to understand the laws of *Mikvaos*, where the *halacha* differentiates between joining two bodies of water on the surface and beneath the surface.

On a different occasion he shared a striking idea that he had heard from Rabbi Daniel Movshovitz, *Rosh Yeshiva* of Kelm. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Koenigsberg, Germany, the philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote a brilliant treatise, "A Critique of Pure Reason," touching upon some sublime concepts. Reb Daniel explained where Kant got this inspiration from: In far-

away Vilna, sat the holy Gaon Rabbeinu Eliyahu, who so shunned the influence of the outside world, that when he sat and studied Torah, he had his windows shuttered all day and night, so that the sights and sounds of the street should not invade his sacred space. He therefore studied by candlelight, even in mid-day. While the *Gaon* succeeded in keeping the outside world from entering his

philosopher had dedicated his brilliant mind to search for pure truth, and was therefore prepared to pick up a tiny glimmer of the light emanating from Vilna. That inspired him to approach the lofty concepts alluded to in "A Critique of Pure Reason."

#### TORAH – THE ULTIMATE SOURCE OF ALL WISDOM



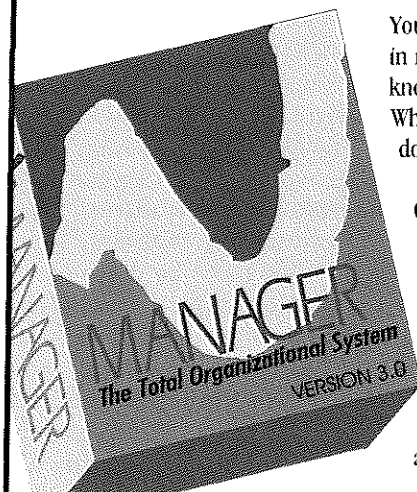
Once, during *bein hazmanim* intercession, Rabbi Gifter traveled from Telshe to Kovno to visit with the famed Torah genius, Rabbi Mordechai Pogranansky. Rabbi Pogranansky asked the young yeshiva *bachur* what he was learning during his vacation, and Rabbi Gifter gave him a long list of Torah subjects he was engaged in.

"And what are you doing to rest your mind a little bit?" asked Rav "Mottel" (as he was fondly known).

Rabbi Gifter replied, "For 'light' reading I have been looking into a Nobel

room, the pure light of Torah emanating from inside his sealed room could not be confined. It radiated outward, spreading all over the world in every direction. In Koenigsberg, a gentile

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Prize-winning book called *'At Home and in the World'*, by the Indian philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore. Rabbi Gifter proceeded to tell Reb Mottel some of the thought-provoking ideas he had culled from that book.

Rabbi Pogramansky's responded, "Of course, I know that there is knowledge in the gentile world. But I also know that there is more deep wisdom in one Torah teaching than there is in everything that the secular world has to teach! Believe me when I tell you that for the past three months, I have not stopped thinking about one statement in the Midrash. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar erected a huge idol in his own image and forced everyone in the world to bow down to it. The rabbis of the Midrash teach that through some trickery, Nebuchadnezzar caused this lifeless idol to appear to speak. Day and night, without a stop, it cried out, *Anochi Hashem Elokecha! I am Hashem your G-d!*"

Reb Mottel concluded: "We learn an important lesson from this. The Midrash teaches us that even though Nebuchadnezzar thought that this statue would bear eloquent testimony to his own divinity, in actuality even this icon proclaimed that *Hashem* is the One and Only G-d. The mere fact that an object exists attests to a Creator who brought it into existence. Everything in creation bears testimony to a Creator!"

Rabbi Gifter would elaborate on this theme:

Elsewhere, the *Midrash (Eicha Rab-bosi 2:17)* says: "If someone will tell you

that there is wisdom to be found by the gentile nations, believe him. But if someone tells you that there is Torah to be found among the gentile nations, don't believe him!" At first glance, this statement seems to praise the gentiles for possessing wisdom. In truth, the sole aim of this statement is only to praise the Torah. Torah is sublime wisdom, emanating from the ultimate Source, from the mouth of the Almighty Himself. This wisdom, which is truly "out of this world," is reserved exclusively for G-d's Chosen Children, the Jews. In this

available to the gentiles.

As Rabbi Gifter filled the hearts and minds of his *talmidim* with such elevating and inspiring ideas, their entire being was suffused with love for *Hashem's* Torah, and their entire value system was transformed.

## A TORAH OF FIRE

Rabbi Gifter told me that he once went to a renowned professor for an examination for high blood pressure. The good doctor told him that

only intelligent, sensitive people suffer from a certain genre of high blood pressure because they take things to heart.

Rabbi Gifter remarked, "Doctor, King Solomon himself expressed that insight many years ago when he observed, *As one increases his wisdom he increases his pain (Kohelles 1,18)*. But, my dear doctor, do you think it is better to be a 'glump'

who feels no pain, or to be an intelligent individual who empathizes and experiences pain? Undoubtedly, it is far better to suffer the pain that results from the development of the heart and mind!"

Rava taught: "When a young Torah scholar becomes heated in anger, it is the Torah within him that is aflame!" (*Taanis 4a*) *Rashi* explains: "The more Torah one learns, the more he develops his heart, and it becomes more sensitive and caring. The Torah scholar therefore takes things to heart more than other people do, and he reacts with greater emotion!"

People who do not understand the dynamics of Torah may entertain the dis-



Rabbi Gifter at the 65th Annual National Convention of Agudath Israel of America. Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer at the podium

world, one can discover secular and scientific wisdom aplenty – and it has significance. But this wisdom is only a *derivative* of Torah wisdom, which comes from the One and Only Source of wisdom, the Almighty. If there would be no Torah in this world, there would not be any other wisdom at all! Those who study Torah stand at the very core of wisdom, those who study other disciplines stand at the outer edge. They are catching a mere glimpse of the Torah's light that radiates outward to every corner of the cosmos. That light at the periphery is no longer called Torah; it is mere "wisdom," and that is indeed



torted idea that Torah scholarship merely develops the mind at the expense of the heart. They paint a grotesque caricature of the *talmid chacham* as a heartless halachic automaton, who tyrannizes the people with insensitive demands. Nothing could be further from the truth. The heart is naturally paralyzed by egocentricity. Only selfless study of pure Torah can emancipate a person from his inborn selfishness and insensitivity. Left to its own devices, the heart will continue to shrivel and shrink, the longer man lives for himself. Only Torah study can reverse the process and expand the heart so that it will have room enough to care for the needs of others.

#### A DEFINITION OF GADLUS

**H**ow do we take measure of the person who has made others aware of their own greatness, and summoned them to live to their highest level?

A truly great man inspires greatness. A great builder is recognized by the quality and quantity of the edifices he has constructed. A great painter is acclaimed for the outstanding masterpieces he has produced. A great man has the ability to bring out potential greatness that lies dormant within others. A meeting with Rabbi Gifter was never a casual experience. It was an intense encounter, which left a lasting impression. It stirred something within you. It challenged you to live by a higher standard. There was nothing petty or trivial about this man. His very presence seemed to demand action and advancement.

When he delivered a public address, he did not merely lecture. He thundered, he exhorted, he forced you to open your heart and let his thoughts and ideas penetrate.

When he taught a *Gemora shiur*, he didn't just educate. He took over your mind and forced you to think until he stretched your mind to greater proportions. "Stretch!" That is the key word in his mode of operation.

He opened up our eyes and taught us how to look at the world with "Torah spectacles," which provided us with

unlimited opportunities to see the wonders of Hashem's creation. He saw the wonders of the most elementary aspects of nature. He collected leaves. He savored dramatic views of clouds and brilliant sunsets. A single blossom. Fields of flowers. Waters – rushing or still. "Don't be a *kaltn lungen leber* (a cold slab of beef)," he'd cry. Some people were born old – the greatest tragedy!

The sagacity of Torah and the youthful vigor of a curious child... both pulsed within Rabbi Gifter. And the memory of his greatness still throbs within his *talmidim*, challenging us, guiding us, and encouraging us. Each of us cherishes a special encounter, a jolting remark.

A bachur once asked Rabbi Gifter how he managed to remember everything. Was he blessed with a photographic memory?

"Not at all," he replied. "You see, I view every day as possibly being my last day on earth. [He wrote his *tzava'a* (last will and testament) close to 40 years ago, and purchased a gravesite in Har Hazeisim over 15

years ago.] So when I learn a piece of *Gemora*, I approach it as though it might be my last. I treasure it. And as a result, it is so precious to me, that I never forget it."

He later remarked to me that he often thinks of his trans-Atlantic trip back to New York from Telshe in 1938. He and his father-in-law-to-be, Rabbi Zalman Bloch ז"ל, spent two weeks aboard a rickety old steamer, with hardly enough food to last the trip. "In fact, on the second last day," he reminisced, "we only had a bottle with three drops of *Slivovitz* and ah *kreitchikel harte broit* [a dried up end-piece from a loaf of bread]. We knew that this was to be our last taste of food before landing, in a day or two. Never did I enjoy a bite of bread or a sip of beverage as much as that *kreitchikel* und *troppele Slivovitz*! Every piece of a *Gemora* I learn," he added, "is potentially my last bite, my last sip. How I savor it!"

How we each savor every last memory of our encounters with our great melamed!

He will be sorely missed. ■

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