

# When the Sun Set At Midday:

## An Appreciation of Rabbi Raphoel Boruch Sorotzkin זכר צדיק לברכה

When the Telshe Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Boruch Sorotzkin זכר צדיק לברכה, passed away on Friday night, 13 Shvat (February 9, '79) the loss was felt on many levels — the personal and the communal — by his bereaved family, by his yeshiva, and by the many institutions and organizations that he served as life spirit.

Rabbi Sorotzkin was born on 13 Shvat, 5677 — precisely 62 years, to the day, before his death — in Zhetel, Lithuania, where his father, Rabbi Zalmen Sorotzkin, זצ"ל, was rav. Reb Zalmen later earned world-wide recognition as the Lutzker Rav, playing a key role in the leadership of Agudath Israel in Europe and subsequently in Israel, where he headed Chinuch Atzmai—Torah Schools, as well as the Vaad Hayeshivos. Reb Boruch's mother was the daughter of Rabbi Eliezer Gordon זצ"ל, revered Rav and Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe. Thus Reb Boruch was brought up with the twin heritage of Torah scholarship and communal leadership, as exemplified by both his parents' families.

As a young man, Reb Boruch studied under Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, זצ"ל, in Baranovitch, and then under Rabbi Boruch Ber Lebovitz זצ"ל in Kaminetz. In 1940, he married Rachel Bloch, daughter of the famed Telzer Rav and Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Avrohom Yitzchok Bloch, הי"ד. With the outbreak of World War II, they escaped to America and moved to Cleveland, where he joined his wife's uncles (and his own cousins) Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch and Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz זכרונם לברכה, who re-established Telshe in America. In 1943 Reb Boruch began delivering shiurim in the Yeshiva. The Yeshiva grew and flourished. In 5715 (1954) the Rosh Hayeshiva, Reb Elyahu Meir, passed away and the full burden of responsibility fell on the shoulders of Reb Chaim Mordechai Katz. When Rabbi Katz passed away ten years later, Reb Boruch together with יב"ל Rabbi Mordechai Gifter



assumed leadership of the Yeshiva as Roshei HaYeshiva. Reb Boruch, in the Telzer tradition, extended his sphere of activities to include ever more areas of communal responsibility—Chinuch Atzmai, Torah Umesorah, Agudath Israel of America (as one of the youngest member of its Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah—Council of Torah Sages). The immense vacuum left by Reb Boruch's passing will not easily be filled.

RABBI CHAIM DOV KELLER has been associated with Telshe and Rabbi Boruch Sorotzkin for close to thirty years, first as a talmid in Telshe-Cleveland, then as maggid shiur in the mechina, as mashgiach in the yeshiva, and subsequently as Rosh Hayeshiva in Telshe-Chicago. The following impressions regarding the late Telsher Rosh Yeshiva are not intended as a definitive biography or even as an in-depth evaluation of the man and his contribution to Klal Yisroel. They are adapted mainly from hespeidim (eulogies) delivered in Telshe Yeshiva in Chicago and at Agudath Israel of Toronto. N.W.

"When Rabbi Yochanan passed away Rabbi Yitzchok ben Elazar began his *hesped*: קשה היום לישראל כיום "This day is as difficult for Israel as the day the sun set at midday, as it is written (Amos 8): 'And it will come to pass on that day, that I will cause the sun to set at midday,' which Rabbi Yochanan had explained as referring to the day when King Yoshiahu was killed" (Moed Katan 25). Rashi (Divei Hayamim II 35, 25) explains the expression as reflecting Yoshiahu's premature death—he was killed at thirty nine, in the midst of his years. How then, could Rabbi Yitzchok ben Elazar use this metaphor in regard to the death of Rabbi Yochanan when Rabbi Yochanan had passed away at an extremely old age? (He had been a Rosh Yeshiva for eighty years!)

Apparently age is not the decisive factor in using this term; rather, just as Yoshiahu left this world in the very midst of his most productive years, so did Rabbi Yochanan. Even though he had aged, he was still in the very midst of his work of learning and teaching Torah. His spiritual energy and intellectual powers were those of a young man.

So, too, did the Rosh HaYeshiva Reb Boruch leave this world at the very peak of his manifold activities for Torah and Klal Yisroel. When we first met Reb Boruch, he was a young man, in his thirties, and although he passed away at the age of 62, he never "grew old." He retained the energy, the dynamism, the enthusiasm in both learning and *avodas haklal* of a man many years his junior. When he was taken from us it was ובה השמש בצהרים as if the sun had set at noon. And what a sun that was! A sun that radiated warmth and light, inspiration and joy to all.

*It was said that his capacity for deep involvement in a Talmudic topic and his enthusiasm for a Torah discussion were inherited from his grandfather, Rabbi "Laizer" Gordon, who once passed*

*outside a Beis Medrash, and—hearing two Yeshiva-leit arguing over a point—vaulted through an open window to join the discussion*

*Colleagues remember crossing Russia with Reb Boruch by Trans-Siberian Railroad. Their fate was undecided, the landscape forboding, the food limited—the tensions almost tangible. Reb Boruch, throughout the trip, oblivious to the atmosphere of crisis, had a Gemora open on his knees, his eyes only on the pages before him . . .*

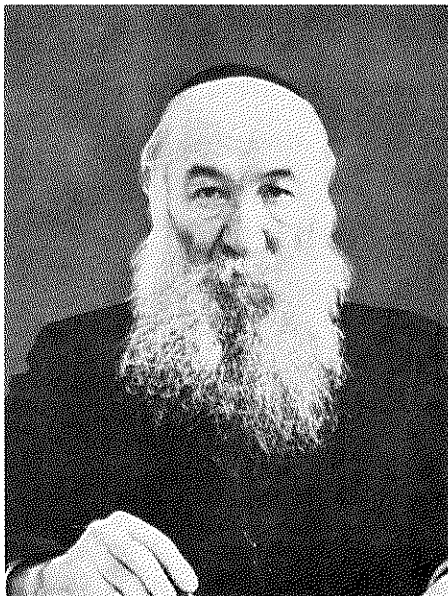
*Those who occupied the front seats in the blatt shiur he said in former years soon learned never to leave their hands on top of the table. And his chavrusos would also keep their hands out of his way. Those who didn't soon learned that when he became involved in a chiddush he would seize anything within his grasp to emphasize his point . . . "Anything" could be a hand, which he would squeeze until all the knuckles cracked.*

### "The Sun in Full Strength" — Even in Suffering

ח"ר הנעלבים ואינן עולבין שומעין חרפתן ואינן משיבין עושין מאהבה ושמחים ביסורים, עליהם הכתוב אומר: ואוהביו כצאת השמש (שבת פ"ח:) . . . Those who act out of love and rejoice in suffering, of them it is said "and those who love Him will go forth as he sun in its full strength" (Shabbos 88b).

Reb Boruch was not afraid to take a firm stand, was not hesitant about forcefully advocating the *Daas Torah* as he saw it, notwithstanding the petty attacks he was at times forced to suffer. If he chose to respond, it was with dignity.

He acted with love—love of the Torah which he



RABBI ELIEZER GORDON זצ"ל  
Telzer Rav, whose enthusiasm for Torah was reflected in his grandson, Reb Boruch.

RABBI ZALMAN SOROTZKIN זצ"ל  
Lutsker Rav, whose sense of responsibility for Klal was implanted in his son, Reb Boruch.

learned and taught, love of the Yeshiva which he labored so incessantly to build and maintain, love of Klal Yisroel, whose burdens he bore so valiantly.

And he was שמח ביסורים, found joy in the midst of suffering:

Seventeen years ago the Rosh Hayeshiva became gravely ill. The prayers of the many were effective in saving him, but for the remainder of his life he lived in the shadow of danger. Besides the lingering malady which finally took his life, he suffered from a heart condition and underwent two major heart attacks. Yet he was always so full of energy and joy that those who were not very close to him were hardly aware of his condition.

Several years ago, Reb Boruch paid one of his regular visits to Chicago. He was then (as was often the case) recovering from a severe illness, and since there were a few hours until his scheduled visitation in the yeshiva, I suggested that he rest for a while.

"I never lie down in the middle of the day!" He replied. "Tell me, are there any phonecalls or personal visits you'd like me to make on behalf of the yeshiva? Let me mobilize my time here for your benefit."

A member of his shiur seventeen years ago recalls how periodically Reb Boruch would convene the class forty-five minutes earlier than usual, so he could finish in time to report to the hospital for radiation treatment. He would deliver the shiur with his customary gusto, and then leave to the car waiting to whisk him away. Once, the discussion in shiur became so heated that he was unaware of the passage of time, and the driver entered to remind Reb Boruch that it was time to leave. He stopped short, realizing that he was forced by circumstances to terminate the lecture, unfinished, and he broke into tears — the only time anyone remembers such an expression over his condition. (Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz)

During his recent stay in the hospital, he often gave encouragement to the doctors and nurses. Before he went into the operating room for his last major operation he called in his sons and sons-in-law, and said a shiur for them—told them a chidush in Torah that he had developed in his hospital room. Later, when I visited him, he repeated the shiur to me with great satisfaction.

During his final period of activity in the Yeshiva in Cleveland, when he had realized that he was extremely ill, he expended unbelievable effort not to depart in the slightest from any of his many sedorim, nor to lighten the burdens of his administrative duties. To the end, he was devising ways of improving the yeshiva. In his efforts to enhance Shacharis, and to make certain that davening began promptly, Reb Boruch was always first in the Bais Medrash, even after a pain-racked sleepless night. (Rabbi Chaim Stein)

As yesurim (physical pain) became his constant companion, Reb Boruch seemed to develop a philosophical accommodation to their presence. In his final shmues in the Yeshiva, he said, "Even if one does not attain the level of greatness of Rabbi Akiva, who said the 'Shema' with kavana (fullest concentration) while the Romans ripped his flesh with iron combs, exulting 'All my life I've aspired to fulfill the love of G-d with all my soul! ('b'chol nafshecha'—referring to the command to give up one's life for the sake of belief in G-d, when necessary)—even so, any intelligent, believing Jew must learn to accept yesurim with love. As Rabbeinu Yonah says: 'When one accepts G-d's teachings, and improves his ways and deeds, it is fitting that he rejoice in his sufferings, for they yield lofty results and he should be grateful for them as he is for all means of success.'"

When he was wheeled into surgery, Reb Boruch said, "If I knew that this operation would atone for my aveiros (sins), I would dance into surgery." (Rabbi Avrohom Yitzchok Sorotzkin)

### The Sun: Like a Chassan, Like a Warrior

He had, indeed, much in common with the sun, of which the psalmist tells us: "And [the sun] is like the bridegroom that emerges from his wedding canopy, he rejoices like a mighty warrior to run on a road."

There are two manifestations of simcha evident in the sun: its breathtaking brilliance, and the incredible alacrity with which it runs its course. They can be compared to two types of simcha to be found in talmidei chachomim. There is the simcha that the talmid chacham experiences as he discovers new insights in Torah, which is like the newly found joy the chassan experiences with his bride. And there is the rare simcha that the true Gadol haTorah feels when he shoulders the responsibility of Klal Yisroel. His is like the simcha of the tried and proven warrior that runs out to battle. He has no fears. He does not shirk his duty—he rejoices in it. His only sadness comes from not being able to face new challenges. This was Reb Boruch. His love of Torah was boundless, yet he was a chassan who realized that there was a time to "emerge from the chupah." There's a time when the talmid chacham must go out to do battle — to face unpleasant tasks and hardships. Reb Boruch did all this and he did it with simcha.

His face radiated with a tremendous joy from learning, whether alone or with a chavrusa or saying a shiur. And his joy was reflected in the tremendous zrizus (swiftness) with which he attended to his many responsibilities. Whether in the Yeshiva office (where he would look at a column of figures and correct the book-keeping), or on his trips to solicit funds, or participating in meetings of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, Chinuch Atzmai, Tashbar or Torah Umesorah, where

the problems of Klal Yisroel were analyzed, and strategies were devised to solve them. There was literally no aspect of his life which did not bear the twin marks of joyous enthusiasm and responsibility. The largest task was not too awesome for him to undertake, nor were the most minute details too insignificant for him, if he felt that they had to be done and he could do them best.

Reb Boruch was to a large degree responsible for covering the budget of Telshe Yeshiva and spent many days every year on fund-raising trips across the country. Yet when his father the Lutzker Rav, Reb Zalman Sorotzkin, passed away, Reb Boruch took over the responsibility that his father had carried for the financial existence of Chinuch Atzmai. Every month a financial statement was sent to him, which he studied as he did his own bank statement and that of Telshe Yeshiva. More than once he personally guaranteed the transfer of funds from America to Israel. On numerous occasions, amounts in the tens of thousands were needed, and he personally drew loans from a Cleveland bank to cover the transfer, repaying them later with funds that he and Telshe talmidim raised for this purpose.

In the midst of a six-day fund raising trip to Los Angeles for Telshe (he did not want to stay away from the yeshiva for a full week), he learned that the speaker scheduled to address a parlor meeting in Chicago for Chinuch Atzmai was ill, and had cancelled. He offered his services, with two provisions: that a flight be arranged to return to California on the same day, and his family not be informed of the strenuous undertaking.

No undertaking too vast, no assignment too insignificant . . .

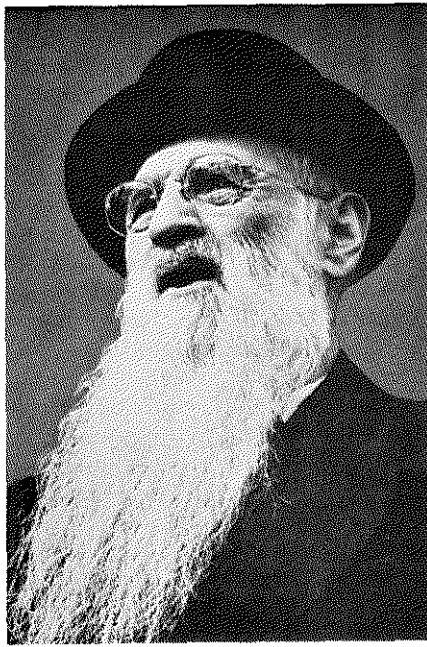
A few months before he passed away, Reb Boruch took personal responsibility for marrying off a niece, the daughter of his brother who had passed on. When a member of the family came upon Reb Boruch personally addressing the invitation envelopes in his study, he asked, "Why are you bothering with this?"

His reply was typical: "No one knows this list as I do, and if I don't do it, who will do it right? — But don't let the kalla know. She'll feel bad."

When in New York City during a August heat wave, he called Agudath Israel and asked, "What can I do for Agudath Israel? I'm here for three days." "The heat is unbearable. Why don't you relax for a few days?" "I have these three days until the zman starts. I repeat: What can I do for Agudath Israel?"

After a severe heart attack several years ago, some of the organizations that he was associated with hesitated to call on him. He telephoned Chinuch Atzmai, and asked, "Why don't I hear from you?" "I don't want to bother the Rosh Yeshiva until he fully regains his health." "Not even for counsel? . . . Do you think that my head has stopped working?"

Yet, Reb Boruch would not waste a moment from his Torah study. It was the secret of his great *simcha*. He would arise early to learn, and could be seen late into the night—sometimes into the early hours of the following morning—bent over a *sefer* in his study. Even when being driven around on one of his many fund-raising trips for the Yeshiva, he would look into a *sefer* if there was sufficient light, or "talk in learning" with his companions. In his last years, he would constantly repeat בעניי לולא תורתך שעשועי או אברהי בעניי "Were it not for my



RABBI ELIYAHU MEIR BLOCH זצ"ל  
and

RABBI CHAIM MORDECHAI KATZ זצ"ל,  
who founded the transplanted  
Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, where  
they were joined by their nephew,  
Reb Boruch.

delight in Your Torah, I would perish in my suffering."

He was a prodigious writer. He painstakingly recorded every *shiur*, every *shmuess*, *drasha*, or *chidush* in *halacha* or *agada* in one of the many volumes of notebooks he left behind. And he was not satisfied with writing it once. If the results did not meet with his approval, he would rewrite until they did. This writing was usually done at night, when he was undisturbed by his other responsibilities. Many times the family would urge him to go to bed, but his answer would be, "I must write this down while it is still fresh in my mind."

He found time for everything: For his family — despite the many demands on him, Reb Boruch found time for his wife and children, to advise them, to learn with them, to direct them.

For the Yeshiva — there was no aspect of the Yeshiva — spiritual or material — which did not come under his scrutiny.

For the city — he was for many years the active chairman of the Vaad HaChinuch of the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland, and was a leader of all activities for Yiddishkeit in the city.

For *Klal Yisroel* — only three months before his passing he mustered every ounce of his waning strength to attend and address the national convention of Agudath Israel of America where in a glance everyone realized how sick he really was. Yet they were amazed by his stamina and the enthusiasm of his fiery address to the convention.

When asked why he did not watch his health by curtailing his activities, his answer was, "Who knows if it is not in this *zechus* that I'm alive?"

On a Friday last December, when he was approaching the final stages of his illness, Reb Boruch called someone in New York to meet him

at the airport on Motzaei Shabbos (Saturday night). A noted philanthropist who had given generously to Telshe, Chinuch Atzmai, and other important causes had passed away, and Reb Boruch wanted to be *menachem avel* (to pay a condolence call). "I don't think you should exert yourself so in your condition," was the response.

"I asked you for a favor, not for advice. Can you meet me there or shall I call someone else?"

He met him at La Guardia. At the home of the mourners, the Rosh Yeshiva asked the children, "Have you divided up your father's *yerusha* (inheritance) yet?"

They looked at him, with shocked disbelief.

"No — not his material holdings," he said. "His spiritual legacy — the institutions he supported. Who's going to help Telshe now? Who's taking over your father's role in Chinuch Atzmai? In Torah Umesorah? In Beth Medrasha Govoha?"

Although relatively young, he was invited to become a member of the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah, where the venerable *ziknei Gedolei hador* valued his keen perception of issues and his wisdom in approaching some of the most difficult and complicated problems facing *Klal Yisroel*.

The Rosh Yeshiva of Lakewood, Reb Shneur Kotler, succinctly summed up his appreciation of Reb Boruch in his *hesped* at the *levaya* in Telshe Yeshiva, in Wickliffe: "איש חי רב פעילים" "A dynamic person pulsating with life whose deeds are many." When at a meeting of *Roshei Yeshivos* or *askanim*, he would infuse life into the discussion, dispel pessimism, and inspire others to action by his own readiness to assume responsibility and hard work. He could step into an abstract discussion and precipitate decisive action with his: "Nu, yetzt



"When Reb Boruch spoke . . ." at Agudath Israel of America Convention, 1977.

*vus darf men ton?"* (Now, what do we do?)

His greatness in Torah and the great responsibility he felt for *Klal Yisroel* went hand in hand, as has always been the pattern among true *Gedolei Torah*.

### *He Stood Before Kings*

*"If you have seen a man dilligent in his work he will stand before Kings" — these are the tzadikim who do the work of Hashem. Therefore, they will stand out in Torah of which it is said "With me (says the Torah) do kings reign." (Midrash Rabba Shir Hashirim)*

*If there was anyone who was swift and dilligent at this work, it was the Rosh HaYeshiva Reb Boruch — and therefore he was zoche to stand tall in Torah. Indeed, it would seem that G-d rewards Gedolei HaTorah who take away precious time from learning for avodas haklal by granting them greater levels of Torah.*

The lessons to be drawn from his life are the lessons to be learned from the *Keruvim* symbolizing *talmidei chachomim*, that were part of the covering of the *Aron HaKodesh*:

*They had faces of children — always young, always fresh, always approaching the sugya (topic) with a new insight, an enthusiasm that only children have as they learn something for the first time. They faced each other — talmidei chachomim are not each for himself. They work together. Yet they always face downward toward the Aron HaKodesh which contains the Torah, for the Torah is their guide for thought and action. They were of one piece with the Kapores—(the cover of the Aron)— They were not molded separately and then attached to the Aron Kodesh. They were beaten of one piece of gold. The personality of the talmid chacham is formed from the Torah, not independently of it and then attached.*

*"The Keruvim stretched their wings on high protecting the covering of the Aron with their wings."*

Those same talents and energies which the *Gedolei Hador* use to ascend ever higher in Torah, those aspirations for greatness are the very same as those with which they protect the Torah. And those wings with which they shield the Torah from all attacks, are the very ones with which they ascend to greatness in Torah.

### *An Inability to Sit Idle*

The *Gemora* tells us that Rabba said that if a man hired workers for a day and the work for which he hired them was finished in the middle of the day he may give them other work of similar or easier nature. Otherwise he has to pay them their full wages. The *Gemora* asks: why should he pay them for a full day's labor — let him pay them as he would a worker that would take a reduction in salary so as to have free time. The *Gemora* answers that Rabba was referring to the porters of his own city, *Mechuza*, that were so accustomed to carrying heavy loads that when they sat idle they became weak. They therefore had to be paid in full. (*Baba Metzia* 77a)

The Telzer Rosh Hayeshiva was such a man — a man who could carry the heaviest of loads and could not stand to be idle. The work which G-d in His wisdom had designated for him was finished in the middle of that great day, which was his life. But Reb Boruch would have wanted to continue that noble work.

On the last day of his life, his mind was still clear but as the end approached he kept asking מיר הייבט מיר "Lift me up!" The family could not understand what he wanted, because they had already raised the hospital bed as far as it could go. It would seem that the Rosh Yeshiva meant another type of uplifting. He could not be still. Then he said, "Moshe."

His son did not understand — "What Moshe? There's no Moshe here."

His answer was, "Why don't you understand? Moshe Rabbeinu." Just before his great spirit left this world, he somehow, in some way, experienced an awareness of Moshe Rabbeinu.

He passed away on Friday night, 13 Shevat, the day on which he was born — just as Moshe Rabbeinu was born on 7 Adar and passed away on 7 Adar. שהקב"ה ממלא שנותיהם של צדיקים מיום ליום ומחדש ולחדש "For the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, completes the years of Tzaddikim from day to day and from month to month." When the Rosh Yeshiva Reb Boruch passed away, the sun set at midday. He would have wanted to finish his day's work. But G-d, in His ultimate wisdom, decreed otherwise. Surely — like the men of *Mechuza* — he will be paid in full. יהי זכרו ברוך ותהי משכורתו שלמה

The funeral procession in Boro Park, Brooklyn.

