

Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum זצ"ל

This past 28 Teves/January 6, world Jewry sustained a profound loss with the *petira* (passing) of Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum, זצ"ל, *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Mirrer Yeshiva of Brooklyn. As noted in these pages (Jan. '08), he was one of the last binding links with the greatness, glory and grandeur of the Torah giants who learned and developed in the Eastern European Torah centers, and then came to the United States, and reached out to American youth. Through this interaction, these *marbitzei Torah* helped transplant and create a flourishing Torah community in a place that had been a veritable Torah desert.

Born in the small Polish Lithuanian town of Kinishev in 1921, Reb Shmuel learned under Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman in Baranovich for three years, and then in the Mir, where he became very close with the *Mashgiach*, Rabbi Yechezkel Levenstein, זצ"ל. After spending the war years in Shanghai, where he was widely recognized for his total immersion in Torah study, he came to America in

1947, with the rest of the Mirrer Yeshiva. Rabbi Avraham Kalmanowitz, who had sustained the yeshiva in Shanghai and reestablished it on American soil, chose Reb Shmuel as a husband for his daughter, רחל"כ, Reichel. The couple married in 1950.

When Rav Kalmanowitz passed away in 1964, Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum and Reb Avraham's oldest son, Rabbi Shraga Moshe Kalmanowitz, were appointed as *Roshei Yeshiva* of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn.

His remarkable full-time involvement in learning and presenting *shiurim* coupled with his intense dedication to the well-being and progress of each *talmid* in the yeshiva, as well as his concern for interested *ba'alebatim* created an unusual impact on all with whom he had contact. In the pages that follow, we are presenting the impressions recorded by several *talmidim* who were profoundly influenced by Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum during the many years that they developed under his influence and guidance.



Left: Rabbi Faivelson (Tsefas) with Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum זצ"ל, talking to Amos Bunim and Rabbi Bender

It is a formidable task for any *talmid* to write about the *Rosh Yeshiva*, זצ"ל. How can one attempt to describe an individual whose impact on our lives was so powerful in so many ways, for so many years? Nonetheless, I will attempt to convey some of what I learned from this *adam gadol* over a period of 42 years, from his *hashkofos* and sublime personal conduct, making use of some of the *divrei Torah umussar* that he imparted to us.

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RABBI YAAKOV BENDER

A Talmid's Appreciation

A KING AND A FATHER

Hashem commanded *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "*Assei lecha ... Make for yourself two trumpets of silver.*"¹ Among the insights that *Rashi* derives from "*Assei lecha*" is "That they should blast [on the trumpets] before you [i.e., Moshe] as [is done before] a king."² While it is common to sound trumpets in honor of kings and other heads of state, why should this have been done for *Moshe Rabbeinu*?

The *Rosh Yeshiva* explained that according to *Chazal*, someone who learns Torah *lishma* (for its own sake) is worthy of *malchus*, kingship (*Avos* 6:1). They further teach (*Gittin* 62a) that Torah sages are called "kings," as it is written: "Through me [e.g., the Torah], kings will reign" (*Mishlei* 8:15). Since true royalty is embodied in the great *talmid chacham*, no one

¹ *Bamidbar* 10:2

² The Torah delineates the various uses of these trumpets for the nation as they traveled, in time of war, etc. The *Rosh Yeshiva* expended much time and effort over the years on the study of *Chumash* with *Rashi* and he derived scores of *chiddushim* from this *limud*.

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 the Rosh Yeshiva was
 the symbol of utter
 dedication to the study
 and teaching of Torah.
 He had no desire for
 anything outside of
 Torah and mitzvos.**

personified *malchus* more than *Moshe Rabbeinu*. Therefore, it was entirely proper to sound trumpets before Moshe, the ultimate earthly king.

In the *Rosh Yeshiva*, we saw *malchus*, the nobility that comes from being totally immersed in Torah and living a life in which every step, every act and every word is a reflection of Torah. The *Rosh Yeshiva* was totally self-effacing; his humility was genuine, natural. Yet, anyone in his presence could easily perceive that he was head and shoulders above other people.

He could be very demanding of us. He would quote *Rashi*, who says that the *meraglim* had seen how Miriam was stricken with *tzara'as* for speaking critically of her brother, "yet, they did not derive a lesson, and reported negatively about the Holy Land."³ And he would tell us that worse than a sin-

ner is someone who turns a deaf ear to sincere reproof.

I can still hear the *Rosh Yeshiva's* stinging rebuke when I wanted to leave yeshiva on a Thursday evening so that I could spend Shabbos in the Catskills with my widowed mother. The *Rosh Yeshiva* approved of my devoting time to being with my mother; he would frequently inquire as to her well-being. But he was adamant that I should not leave yeshiva before Friday morning. When I indicated that I found his demand difficult, he became upset with me. But I knew that he was upset because he truly cared about me and felt that it was in the interest of my spiritual growth that I be away from yeshiva as little as possible.

We loved him very much, knowing that he, too, loved us like a father. This was evident in so many ways, throughout the decades. This past *Asseres Yemei Teshuva*, I and another *talmid*, Rabbi Shlomo Avigdor Altusky,⁴ attended the *Rosh Yeshiva's* annual *teshuva derasha*. He ended his *derasha* by asking us to daven for him. Afterwards, we went over to wish him a *gut yahr* and receive his *beracha*. "You came all the way from Far Rockaway?" he asked, as if we had done him a favor by coming. At that moment, I felt his tremendous *ahava*, the *ahava* that he had shown me for 42 years, ever since the day that I arrived at Mirrer Yeshiva as a young *yasom* who was still traumatized by his father's sudden passing.

LIKE A MALACH

Recently, I asked a fellow *talmid* what, to his mind, was the secret of the enormous awe that we felt towards the *Rosh Yeshiva*.

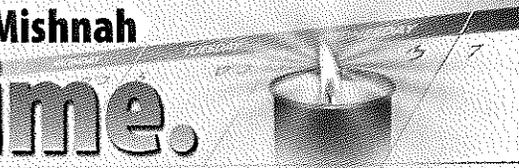
His reply: "I looked at him as a *malach Hashem*."

The Gemara teaches, "If a rebbi is like a *malach Hashem*, then seek Torah from his mouth." Another Gemara teaches that if the previous generations were akin to angels, then we are mere mortals. The *Rosh Yeshiva* was a *malach* in the sense that he had perfected himself

⁴ *Rosh Yeshiva* of Darchei Torah's Beis Medrash Heichal Dovid

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to the point where he had no need for the pleasures of this world. He derived indescribable pleasure from serving Hashem, especially from *limud haTorah*, and he had absolutely no need for anything material. When, for example, he would deride over-involvement in food (“Steak? Who needs it!”), we knew that the *Rosh Yeshiva* was far removed from such indulgence.

After the *Rosh Yeshiva’s* first heart attack, in which eighty percent of his heart muscle was destroyed, the doctors said that the fact that his arteries were absolutely clean had saved his life. His family then revealed that several years earlier, the *Rosh Yeshiva* had stopped eating meat because of kashrus concerns. When this was told to his dear friend and *chavrusa*, Rabbi Nachum Partzovitz, שליט”א, of *Mir-Yerushalyim*, *Reb Nachum* quoted the *passuk*: “*Shomer nafsho yirchak midavar ra* – He who guards his soul will distance himself from anything of evil.”

It has been said that teachers of Torah are likened to Heavenly angels because each *malach* is entrusted with one specific mission. A successful *marbitz Torah* must be consumed by his sacred mission of imparting Torah and the *derech haTorah* to his *talmidim*.

In our generation, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was the symbol of utter dedication to the study and teaching of Torah. He had no desire for anything outside of Torah and mitzvos.

A few years ago, a former *Mirrer talmid* living in Flatbush went to the *Rosh Yeshiva’s* home to invite him to serve as *sandak* at his son’s *bris*. The baby was born on *Asarra Be’Teves*. It was an hour and a half after the fast had ended, and the *talmid* was informed that the *Rosh Yeshiva* was in the yeshiva. But the young man did not find him in the *beis midrash*. He knocked on his office door (which was simply a room for learning in privacy) but there was no response. Concerned, he asked someone where the *Rosh Yeshiva* might be.

“He’s probably in his office,” came the reply, “but he is so immersed in his learning that he doesn’t hear you. Knock hard.”

The Rosh Yeshiva was a very happy individual. The sparkle in his eyes revealed the true inner joy that he felt. He and his Rebbetzin had no need for what others consider necessities.

Sure enough, the *Rosh Yeshiva* answered the knock. Before explaining the purpose of his visit, the young man said, “It’s an hour and a half after the *z’man*. Would the *Rosh Yeshiva* like something to eat?”

The *Rosh Yeshiva* replied matter-of-factly, “First, I must complete the *sugya* with the *Rambam*.”

The *Rosh Yeshiva* was merely stating a fact: Torah was his lifeblood. Before he could nourish his body, he needed to feed his *neshama* with the *sugya* and *Rambam*.

The first two summers after his first heart attack, he was in South Fallsburg *bein hazemanim*. (Normally, he remained in Brooklyn.) He spent virtually the entire day learning in the *beis midrash* of *Yeshiva Zichron Moshe*.

One day, the *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Elya Ber Wachtfogel, שליט”א, asked him, “What about resting a bit?”

The *Rosh Yeshiva* replied, “But I am resting! During the *z’man*, I prepare *shiurim* on *Bava Basra*; now I am learning *Chullin*.”

JUST VISITING

The home of the *Chofetz Chaim* in Radin was the quintessential abode of one who truly lived as a “visitor” on this planet. As the *Chofetz Chaim* once told someone who expressed surprise at his home’s stark simplicity, “Does a traveler take his furniture with him? I am merely a traveler passing through this world.” His home had a set of table and chairs, a small bookcase and a few beds.

In his total disinterest for material things, the *Rosh Yeshiva* had a most fitting partner in life. Anyone who has visited their home cannot fail to be impressed by its utter lack of adornment. To my knowledge, the only new piece of furniture they acquired in some 50 years was a recliner purchased a few

years ago when the *Rosh Yeshiva*, due to health problems, was unable to sleep in a bed.

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YISSACHAR’S TRANQUILITY

He would often quote *Yaakov Avinu’s* blessing to *Yissachar*, who represents dedication to Torah study. In that *beracha*, *Yissachar* is likened to a donkey that carries a heavy load. Yet, in the next *passuk*, *Yaakov* speaks of *menucha*, tranquility, as being *tov*, good. The juxtaposition of a hard-working donkey without respite and *menucha* seems contradictory.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* would become excited as he told us: The world has a misconception about *menucha*. They think that “the easy life” – vacations, baseball, steaks, having a “good time” – is *menucha*, and that it is *tov*. But that is wholly incorrect. That sort of life is one of *atzlus*, laziness; it is not “good,” and it does not result in a feeling of tranquility and peace of mind.

On the other hand, true attachment to and growth in Torah does not come easily. One must be like a hard-working donkey in accepting upon himself the yoke of Torah. The *Rosh Yeshiva* would tell us how his great rebbi, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, would demand of his *chavrusa* – a young *bachur* – that he not leave the *beis midrash* during their six-hour *sefer*. Easy? Certainly not. But it is this sort of dedication that results in true *menuchas hanefesh*, joy, and accomplishment.

The *Rosh Yeshiva*, as is well known, learned ceaselessly with superhuman effort and devotion under the most difficult circumstances. He suffered his first massive heart attack in 1972. Five

weeks later, on the day of my wedding, I, a *yasom*, was permitted to enter the *Rosh Yeshiva's* bedroom to receive his *beracha*. He was so weak that he could not lift his head off the pillow.

He defied the doctor's predictions, and some six months later, resumed his intensive schedule of learning and delivering *shiurim* with no easing up at all. When his family asked him to allow time for more rest, he replied that according to the doctors, the fact that he was alive and functioning was a miracle, and in that case, he could assume that the miracle would allow him to learn just as before. It did.

EMES

Some of the wealthiest men in the Torah community were attached to the *Rosh Yeshiva* heart and soul. A number of them maintained regular, private learning sessions with him. They wept at his passing as a son would weep for a father, and some accompanied the coffin to *Eretz Yisroel*.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* did not engage in *chanifa* (flattery); he would never accord anyone special honor because of his wealth. To the contrary, he would sometimes tell a big donor, "Do not consider yourself a great *ba'al tzeddaka*. A person must give according to his means. And according to *your* means, you should be giving more."

And this is precisely why they loved him. He was *kulo emes*, his essence was truth. Everyone recognized his sincerity and revered him because of it.

The great benefactors who attached themselves to the *Rosh Yeshiva* were also taken by his *ehrlichkeit*, by the fact that millions of dollars of *tzeddaka* funds passed through his hands, but, he would nevertheless take nothing for himself – even when he was clearly entitled to it.

GOODNESS TO THE
KLAL, GOODNESS TO
THE INDIVIDUAL

“And Yoseif was the ruler over the land, [and] he was the provider to all the people of the land”

(*Bereishis* 42,6). The *Rosh Yeshiva* noted: When in world history did a king, prime minister or president personally involve himself in providing food for his people? Even the best of presidents would not busy himself with such matters. For this, he has members of cabinet, chiefs of staff, heads of departments. But *Yoseif Hatzaddik* was different. As viceroy, he was “the ruler over the land,” yet, at the same time, he was the “provider to all the people,” personally involved with the needs of the individual.

This was our *Rosh Yeshiva*. He was the great *marbitz Torah*, whose mind was forever preoccupied with Torah. Yet, in his last years, he accepted upon himself new responsibilities for the *klal*. He founded and oversaw a multi-million dollar fund for *bnei Torah* of *Eretz Yisroel* who have been hard hit by deep cuts in government funding. He became an “ambassador of Torah,” delivering brilliant *shiurim* in other yeshivos and *kollelim* in addition to his regular *shiurim* at the Mir. And yet, he

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THE MEASURE OF MAN

The *Kohein Gadol* wore the *Choshen* upon his chest. The face of the *Choshen* had twelve precious stones, the *Avnei Milluim* (Stones of Filling, for they filled the golden settings into which they were placed.)

The *Rosh Yeshiva* asked: What makes this a name of distinction for precious

stones? Do we call a diamond a "diamond," or do we call it a "filling stone" because it fills its setting?

The *Rosh Yeshiva* explained: There is a message here. These stones, with the names of the *Shevatim* (Tribes) engraved upon them, represent the Jewish people. A Jew's greatness is measured by how much he "fills" – meaning, he gives to others.

On *Erev Yom Kippur*, one year before his passing, the *Rosh Yeshiva* had a small snack after *Shacharis* and then visited someone who was hospitalized. From there, he went to a family burdened with the stress of a homebound patient who needed round-the-clock care, care that the government did not pay for.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* visited, offered his *beracha* for the coming year, and quietly left an envelope on the table containing \$15,000.

* * *

When the *Rosh Yeshiva's* son, Reb Leib, was hospitalized in New York with cancer, the *Rosh Yeshiva* became friendly with a man whose teenage daughter was in the same hospital, in need of a *refua*. One *Motza'ei Shabbos*, while walking from shul back to the hospital, the *Rosh Yeshiva* inquired about the man's daughter. When the man replied that the situation did not look good, the *Rosh Yeshiva* responded, "Send me an invitation to her wedding – I'll be there."

Baruch Hashem, a few years later, this young woman became a *kalla*. The *Rosh Yeshiva* made an exception by leaving the *beis midrash* during second *seder* to serve as *mesader kiddushin*. As soon as the *chuppa* ended, he returned to the *Mir* for the remainder of second *seder*.

RESPONSIBILITY TO HIS TALMIDIM

His sense of responsibility for his *talmidim* assumed many forms.

At the funeral of a *talmid's* wife, the *Rosh Yeshiva* told the *talmid* that he wanted to accompany him and his children in the car that would take them to the airport. He accompanied them to the airport and for the trip back home

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Simcha Guidelines

THE VORT

- The *Vort* celebration is to be discontinued. The *L'chaim* (held at the time that the engagement is announced) should also not turn into a *Vort*.

THE WEDDING

- For typical families, only 400 invited guests may be seated at the *chassuna seuda*. (The Guidelines make provision for exceptional circumstances – see full text.)
- The *kabbolas panim* smorgasbord should be limited to basic cakes, fruit platters, a modest buffet, and the caterer's standard chicken or meat hot dishes.

- The menu for the *seuda* is limited to 3 courses followed by a regular dessert.

- No Viennese table and no bar.

THE MUSIC

- A band may consist of a maximum of 5 musicians (one of the musicians may act as a vocalist) or four musicians and one additional vocalist.
- A one-man band is recommended.

FLOWERS & CHUPA DECOR

- The total cost of these items for the entire wedding should not exceed \$1,800.

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Rabbi Osher Kalmanowitz and Rabbi Bender
with Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum זצ"ל.

where they were to observe shiva. The *Rosh Yeshiva* escorted them into the house, made sure that they were settled and had whatever they needed, and offered precious words of comfort and *chizuk*. The *talmid* later said that what the *Rosh Yeshiva* did for him and his family on that day was indescribable.

* * *

When a grandson came to inform him of the good news that his wife was expecting their first child, the *Rosh Yeshiva* responded, "And what is with...?" and he proceeded to say the Hebrew names (and mothers' names) of five childless *talmidim* for whom he was *mispalleil* constantly.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* taught me a lesson in responsibility for the precious *neshamos* that a yeshiva accepts into its ranks, a lesson that I hope to never forget.

It happened when I was in the *kollel* of Mirrer Yeshiva. I discovered that a *bachur* in the *beis midrash* was involved with gambling and frequenting undesirable places. I also learned that he was borrowing money from other *talmidim*, and there was real potential for his influence spreading.

I discussed this with three other *yungeleit* and together we approached the *Rosh Yeshiva*, informed him of the situation, and respectfully suggested that the *bachur* be asked to leave the yeshiva.

It was the only time in 42 years that I saw the *Rosh Yeshiva* become flushed with anger. "Did you fast 40 *ta'aneisim*?" he demanded of us. "After you fast 40 *ta'aneisim*, then you can come to me to suggest that we send a *talmid* out of the yeshiva!"

After you fast 40 *ta'aneisim*, then you can come to me to suggest that we send a *talmid* out of the yeshiva!

From that day on, the *Rosh Yeshiva* took a special interest in this *bachur*. Due to his loving influence, the *bachur* underwent a complete transformation and is today an outstanding *talmid chacham* and *marbitz Torah*.

He shared in our troubles and rejoiced in our *simchos*. Even in his later years, he would attend not only weddings of *talmidim*, but of *talmidim's* children – but only after second *seder* in Mirrer Yeshiva had ended. His utter dedication to his learning left its unforgettable imprint upon an entire generation.

* * *

The *Rosh Yeshiva* recognized every person's individuality in molding his *talmidim*. If at times, he seemed demanding, it was because he recognized that particular *bachur's* unique potential, and wanted the *bachur* to recognize it as well.

Certainly, the *Rosh Yeshiva* himself was an incredible example of someone who overcame all odds to utilize his tremendous *kochos hanefesh* to the fullest.

Decades ago, before his first heart attack, the *Rosh Yeshiva* was delivering his daily *shiur* when someone came to tell him that one of his sons had been struck by a car outside the yeshiva. The *Rosh Yeshiva* calmly closed his Gemara, and went downstairs. His son had been

seriously injured (he recovered fully), and the *Rosh Yeshiva* waited until the ambulance had left with his son and rebbetzin to the hospital. Then, he calmly went upstairs to resume his *shiur*. He concluded the one-and-a-half-hour *shiur*, davened *Mincha* with the yeshiva and then left for the hospital.⁵

He suffered so much in his life. He lost his entire family in the Holocaust. He overcame two massive heart attacks. As is well known, after his first heart attack in 1972, the doctor told him that he did not expect him to survive. The *Rosh Yeshiva* responded, "Have you ever been wrong before? This time, you'll be wrong."

He persevered after the tragic killing of his precious son, Chaim Shlomo, and the passing from illness of his precious son, Reb Leib. When he came to be *menacheim aveil* a *talmid chacham* whose young child had been tragically killed in an accident, the *Rosh Yeshiva* said, "Twice the *Satan* took children from me to get me to stop learning, but he did not succeed."

We knew four decades ago that in the *Rosh Yeshiva*, we were seeing the grandeur of Torah. And yet, as the years passed, he seemed to grow greater and greater before our eyes, broadening his horizons, embarking on new undertakings for the sake of Torah and its students. And all that time, he remained firmly anchored to his seat and *shtender* in the back row of the Mirrer *beis midrash*.

He learned and he taught until he literally had no strength. His lesson inspired and will continue to inspire an entire generation.

Yehi zichro baruch! ☞

⁵ In Baranovich, a son of the *Rosh Yeshiva's* rebbi, Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, took seriously ill and was in bed at home, apparently near death. At 10:00 A.M., Reb Elchonon donned his hat and coat to leave for yeshiva, where he would say his daily *shiur*. Someone said to Reb Elchonon, "How can you leave your home at a time like this?" Reb Elchonon replied, "Who knows exactly what will help?" After he left, someone suggested calling a local doctor who had not yet been consulted. That doctor administered an injection, which brought about an immediate improvement in the boy's condition. He recovered fully.