



# HIS HEART WAS THE HEART OF ALL ISRAEL

*MEMORIES AND  
IMPRESSIONS OF  
RABBI SHLOMO FREIFELD  
(1925 - 1990)*

**R**eb Shlomo wrote no books or articles but was one of the most influential Jews of our generation. His communication was powerful, total and intense; the selectivity, abstraction and *tzimtzum* necessary for writing was foreign to his nature. In the words of a boyhood friend, Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, he was like a flowing river. Some of the greatest spiritual giants including the Ari, the Besht, Reb Bunem of Pshischa, Mendel of Kotzk and the Alter from Slobodka wrote virtually nothing. Part of the reason for the prohibition against writing the oral law is the recognition of the need for total communication which cannot be conveyed by the written word.

**R**eb Shlomo profoundly touched the lives of thousands of people in all walks of life and from every conceivable background including *Roshei Yeshiva*, students, doctors, lawyers and businessmen. He was one of the founders of the *Baal Tshuva* movement and created a community of hundreds of families of highly individualistic and totally devoted Jews.

**R**aised in the East New York section of Brooklyn he entered the *Yeshiva Toras Chaim* through the efforts of the unforgettable Rabbi Isaac Shmidman, one of the pioneers of *Yeshiva* education in this country. Shlomo was a normal fun-loving boy, but even at a very young age possessed a special power and depth of spirit that made him stand out. Rabbi Joshua Shmidman recalls his father's special love for Shlomo and how Shlomo's frequent visits to the Shmidman home were looked upon as special events.

Shlomo entered the *Mesivta Rabbi Chaim Berlin* and his unique personality made him a favorite of the *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Isaac Hutner z"l. The young man's combination of humor and profound seriousness, his uncanny insight into human nature and his appreciation of the multiple paths to spirituality must have struck a responsive chord in the great *Rosh Yeshiva*. Rabbi Hutner was without question the single most important influence on

Shlomo as a boy as well as for his entire life.

**B**efore founding *Yeshiva Sh'or Yoshuv* in Far Rockaway in 1967 Reb Shlomo served in many capacities including Rabbi, Principal and *Yeshiva* dean. He was one of the primary forces in the founding of *Peylim* in 1951. That organization helped save the spiritual lives of thousands of Yeminite and Sephardic children and was the seed in the founding of *Chinuch Atzmai*.

**B**ut it was in Far Rockaway that he put down his roots and from there his unique radiance and influence shone forth. He created an entire community\* and besides *Sh'or Yoshuv* he founded elementary and high school *Yeshivas* for boys and girls. Reb Shlomo once remarked that his real birth occurred when he came to Far Rockaway.

**W**hat was Reb Shlomo's special quality? How was he able to reach so many different people, *Baalei Tshuva*, *Yeshiva* dropouts or those just looking for a little extra "*Chiyus*" and a sense of their own worth? He reached them all because he had the rare capacity to penetrate beyond external dress and demeanor to the essential nature of each person and to accept each person as he or she was and because there burned within him an *Aish Kodesh*, a holy flame. Thus, he could guide each person to develop and bloom in accordance with his or her unique nature and situation at that juncture in life. He established a special, deeply personal relationship with all who sought him out.

**H**is broad knowledge enabled him to understand and discuss even the most esoteric topics. Thus, for a *Baal Tshuva* who was a student of Kierkegaard, he began by discussing the Danish philosopher's thought. And if he had no knowledge of a subject which concerned one of his students he made sure to educate himself. Thus, a young man from the West who had been influenced by the American Indians' approach to life once found a pile of books on the floor in Reb Shlomo's study which dealt with the American Indian.

\*Rabbi Hutner once remarked that "those few *kehillot* existing in America seek to replicate their European antecedents; Reb Shlomo created a genuinely American *Kehilla*."

A young man became interested in *Yiddishkeit* and arrived in New York with a list of names and phone numbers to contact. He was unable to relate to his contacts and was about ready to return home. However, there was one more name on his list. Perfunctorily he dialed the number and Reb Shlomo answered. After the young man briefly explained his purpose Reb Shlomo asked him to come over right away. The young man entered the Freifeld home and noticed a child reading a book by Mark Twain. Another child was playing classical music on the piano. For the first time since his arrival in New York the young man felt relaxed. Suddenly he saw a massive figure in the doorway with a broad, natural smile on his face. It was Reb Shlomo. Right then began a relationship which was to totally transform the young man's life and which was to last until Reb Shlomo's passing fifteen years later.

The Alter from Slobodka once said that a human being could not live without respect; it is of the essence of his nature. Every person needs respect in order to believe in the value of his own life. This seemingly simple but powerful principle filtered through to Reb Shlomo from Rabbi Hutner, himself a close disciple of the Alter, and strongly influenced him.

Reb Shlomo once described to this writer his encounter with a young student who had continuously failed in his studies and was understandably despondent. He realized that the boy had never mastered a single *posuk* in his life. He began by studying one *posuk* with him again and again until he had mastered it. The boy was glowing with a sense of success and achievement. Slowly he acquired an understanding and love for learning.

Reb Yosef Mashinsky, a *melamed* in *Siach Yitzchak*, the *cheder* founded by Reb Shlomo, related the story of a bright boy who suffered from dyslexia and was depressed by his inability to master his studies. Reb Shlomo asked his *Rebbe* to study one *amud* of *Gemara* with the boy until he knew it perfectly. When he had done so he came to Reb Shlomo to be tested.

Reb Shlomo enthusiastically praised his achievement. That week Reb Shlomo had a plaque prepared in calligraphy. It read: "If you know this *amud gemara* then you can know all of *Shas*. The next *amud* is not harder, it is just different. Presented to \_\_\_\_\_ Signed, Shlomo Freifeld.

Reb Shlomo believed that being a "*Metsuyan*," an outstanding person, is relative to one's potential. This principle was the foundation of his approach to education. Each student must be taught according to his ability and pace. By studying at the right pace and with ample review, each student has the capacity to achieve total mastery of the subject in his own unique way. This mastery will provide a sense of self-worth and satisfaction and facilitate growth. When this concept is put into practice the results can be astounding. Rabbi Ben Zion Kirsch of HAFTR, a protege of Reb Shlomo has had noted success in applying this approach to students who had long given up on succeeding in their Torah learning. Rabbi Kirsch gives no class-wide, only individual tests, and half-jokingly tells his students that there are only two marks: zero and one hundred.

Reb Shlomo was particularly influenced by the Polish school of *Chassidus* which stressed development of the individual's unique endowments. Reb Bunem of Pshicha and his disciples in the schools of Izbitz-Radzin and Kotzk-Ger were especially congenial to his spirit.

Reb Shlomo was intimately involved in every aspect of the institutions he founded. Believing as he did in the supreme importance of proper *chinuch*, he constantly gave support and strength to his teachers, praising their achievements and abilities, and above all emphasized the tremendous power they had to shape the future of the Jewish people.

Reb Shlomo's concern was for the total development of his students. One student, who had fared poorly in regular *Yeshivas* and is now a prominent educator, recalls that shortly after his arrival in *Sh'or Yoshuv* he was questioned by Reb Shlomo as to where he had been

the previous day. Caught unawares the new student lied. Reb Shlomo said nothing but six months later he took the student to task for lying. "But" asked the student, why did the *Rebbe* wait six months to reprimand me?" "Because," replied Reb Shlomo, "you were not yet a respectable and could not have accepted criticism at that time. Now you are."

Reb Shlomo was a whole person, not a recluse. He was completely immersed in the world around him though transcending it; full of humor, yet profoundly serious. The Jerusalem *Talmud* informs us that we will be held to account for not enjoying the Creator's world. This is not license for hedonistic indulgence; on the contrary it shows that what we might characterize as profane may also be holy when seen in proper perspective. Life itself is a Divine gift and should be cherished and enjoyed. This may be the motivation behind the requirement to pronounce one hundred blessings each day.

Reb Shlomo had a great zest for life and for the small things of existence. Rivka Ruda, a *giyoret* now residing in San Jose, recalls Reb Shlomo's profound influence beginning with his inspired lectures at the Orthodox Union's Gatlinburg, Tennessee retreats. She remembers how he emphasized the importance of building self-confidence in each person and the need to learn at one's own pace. She remembers his inner fire and his talk on the relationship of the *Rav* and his community and how the *Rav* must be encouraged and supported by the community in order to grow and develop, a talk which Rivka happened to be delivering in the very hour of Reb Shlomo's death. But she also recalls that Reb Shlomo taught her how to make pickled herring.

Reb Shlomo's great soul strengthened the faith of all those who knew him and inspired them to attain higher levels of Torah learning and Torah life. One summer many years ago, a brilliant young teenage *Yeshiva* student was spending his summer in a certain camp. The boy had many interests and in the natural course of events would probably have become a profes-

sional. The camp atmosphere allowed for relaxed conversation as well as heated debate. Reb Shlomo was a prominent figure in all the discussions. One day Reb Shlomo launched into a portrayal of one of the European *Zaddikim*, describing the sanctity of his person and life and the beauty of a life permeated with Torah. The young man listened attentively and felt something well up inside of him. Reb Shlomo had touched a latent core. The young man had a feeling that he had turned a corner and his life would never be the same. His premonition proved to be correct and today he is one of the leading *poskim* and *talmidei chochomim* in this country. He has also maintained his many interests.

Reb Shlomo believed in facing issues. At an educational conference a principal described how he removed the sections in the biology book referring to evolution. Reb Shlomo objected: The students would learn of the theory anyway. Shouldn't we be presenting the theory and developing our own approach to the issue?

Reb Shlomo was physically formidable, paralleling the great depth and breadth of his interests. His enormous library reflected his sense of the many valid paths to the worship of God. His knowledge spanned the gamut of Jewish spiritual expression. This multi-dimensionality enabled him to establish rapport with and change the lives of so many people. This quality is reflected in the following incident which occurred sometime in the 1940's: One *Succos* Rabbi Hutner was forced to leave the *Succah* because of rain. He descended to the dormitory and visited Reb Shlomo in his room. On the wall was a picture of Rav Kook. Rabbi Hutner looked up at the picture and said that he — Rav Hutner — had the same *shoresh neshama* (soul root) as Rav Kook. When he added that Reb Shlomo had the same *shoresh neshama* as himself, Reb Shlomo exclaimed: in geometry we learned that 'things equal to the same thing are equal to each other.' The common denominator that each exemplified in his own special way was a broad, all-encompassing

perspective which saw beyond the narrow and parochial.

Reb Shlomo's breadth of vision eschewed the simplistic anti-Zionist views prevalent in some circles. He had a life-time love of Rav Kook though he did not accept all of Rav Kook's views. He admired the writings of Rabbi Shlomo Aviner. On the other hand, he appreciated the greatness of the late Satmar Rebbe. His vision constantly soared to what glories *K'lal Yisroel* could and would achieve. He never lost sight of the big picture. Yet Reb Shlomo was simultaneously a genius in focusing on the particular and individual. One visitor to Gatlinburg aptly phrased it: "I looked into his eyes and he looked into mine and he knew that I knew that he knew."

Reb Shlomo's knack for understanding and helping people is reflected in the lives of thousands of people. Here is but a small sample; An irreligious couple on the brink of divorce was advised to visit the Gatlinburg retreat. Reb Shlomo spoke about *tshuva* and the possibility of change but not as annual resolutions which are quickly broken, but as an ongoing reality; as a way of life. His words and the impact of his personality during informal discussions completely transformed their lives to the path of Torah and brought them back together.

A businessman complained that he had too little time to learn Torah. Reb Shlomo replied that the *Rebono Shel Olam* inheres in the office buildings as well as in the *Bais Hamedrash* and there is work to be accomplished wherever one finds oneself.

A young man asked for advice on a marital problem. Reb Shlomo recommended that he sing *zmiros* at the *Shabbos* table. "How can that help?" asked the young man. Reb Shlomo replied, "Your wife toils to prepare the *Shabbos*. What is your contribution?" Four weeks later the young man reported a significant improvement.

Reb Shlomo had a number of brilliant professionals who became *Baalei Tshuva* and wished to take off time to devote themselves to Torah learning. He carefully guided

them in growing in Torah knowledge while maintaining their professional competence.

Reb Shlomo's thoughtfulness within his own family was legendary. One evening Rabbi Yosef Lieber, then a student in the *Yeshiva*, received a call from Reb Shlomo to come over immediately to participate in a "secret mission." He hurried over excitedly. Reb Shlomo directed him for a distance until they stopped in front of a jewelry store. He asked Yosef to help him pick out a pair of earrings for the *Rebbetzin*. Thus did a *Rebbe* teach his disciple.

This writer had the privilege of knowing Reb Shlomo for forty four years. His conversations reflected a continuous search for truth and purity and a disdain for cant and bluff. His searing insight unfailingly went to the heart of an issue. His concern was passionate and all-consuming. One early morning the phone rang in my home. Reb Shlomo's excited voice was on the other end. He had been reading an article in this magazine and was convinced the author had erred and that the article might have a negative impact. Reb Shlomo berated me for allowing the article to appear. I began to respond, but gradually my discomfiture gave way before the purity of his onslaught and though I intellectually disagreed I somehow felt exhilarated by the passionate honesty of his remarks.

During the last few years of his life Reb Shlomo suffered from cancer and underwent many difficult operations. Amazingly however, his face was unaffected and continued to reflect the splendor of his healthy soul and his ability to lift the spirit of all his disciples and acquaintances was unaffected.

He saw the greatest opportunity for achievement in educating our youth on the true path. Reb Shlomo once said, "after all is said and done we will all end up in the box. What will really count is whether we taught Torah to Jewish children."

He sought to convey a vision of man and a vision of life which he had glimpsed in his contacts with the *gedolim* he had been privileged to meet. For Zalman Mindell, a

devoted disciple, Reb Shlomo communicated a Judaism which was subtle and all encompassing; a Judaism which sought to integrate the diverse streams within Judaism. Political parties blurred the unity of *K'lal Yisroel*. Communicating his vision was frequently difficult; it often seemed as if there was a huge wall separating him from his listeners and he had to

shout to get through the wall. Apparently he did get through.

A few years before he died, a Braslaver *chassid* remarked to Reb Shlomo: "The *Zaddik* absorbs the suffering due to *K'lal Yisrael*." At the funeral procession in Jerusalem the same *chassid* appeared. He was reminded of his earlier remark. In the name of his *Rebbe*, Reb Nachman, he said: "When the

*Zaddik* has completed his physical suffering on behalf of *K'lal Yisroel* he moves on to protect them on another level."

May the sparks from his great flame inspire us to continue his work.

*Yhi Zichro Baruch!*

*Matis Greenblatt*