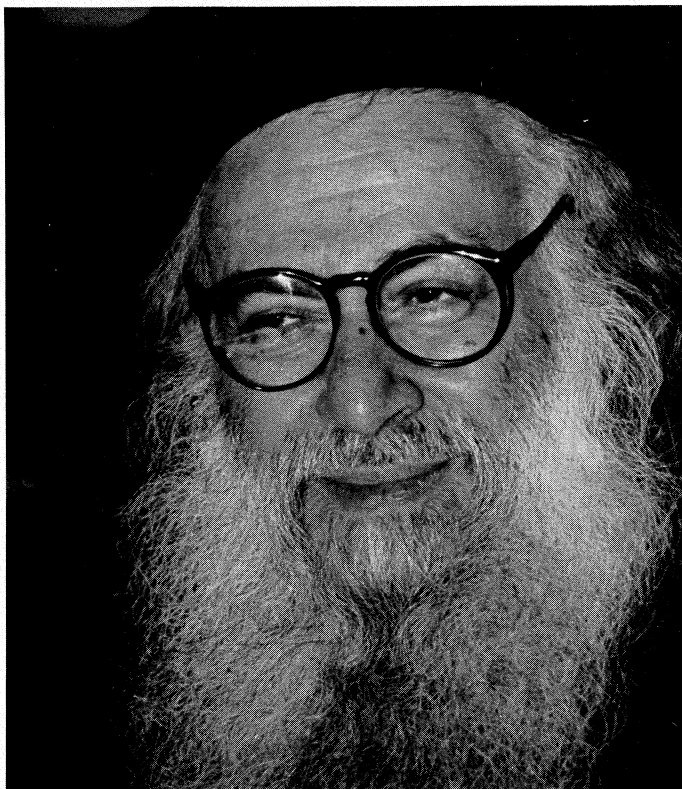


# “REBBY”



## Remembering Reb Shlomo Freifeld זצ"ל

*We mourn the passing of Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld זכר צדיק לברכה, the leader of the Sh'or Yeshuv community in Far Rockaway, New York, which he founded as Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva Sh'or Yeshuv 23 years ago. In addition to his standing as a talmid chacham of renown, Reb Shlomo was distinguished by his unusual personal warmth and sensitive understanding of people from all walks of life, and earned widespread admiration as a pioneer in the field of Kiruv Rechokim. A talmid of Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin and a protégé of its late Rosh Hayeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchok Hunter זצ"ל, he was a Rosh Yeshiva there for a number of years. His public addresses and personal counsel won him a wide following. He will be sorely missed.*

**Rabbi Belsky**, a *musmach* of Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin, is principal of the Hanna Sacks Girls High School in Chicago. A long-time friend of the family of Rabbi Freifeld, זצ"ל, Rabbi Belsky was also a neighbor for several years, when he served as *Rav* of Agudath Israel of Bayswater, in Far Rockaway.

**T**he friend who picked me up at the airport on my way to be *menachem aveil* the Freifeld family was a *talmid muvhak* of Reb Shlomo. He couldn't wait to express his crushing pain. "We loved Rebbby

so deeply! Do you think that now that he left us, we can transfer that love to the *Ribbono Shel Olam*?" It was a question that was impossible to answer, but it was very revealing. Reb Shlomo's legacy was alive.

## LOVE AT EVERY TURN

There were so many facets to his personality, that one could begin almost anywhere, but a logical starting point is his uncanny ability to create love at every turn. It was a magical quality that was keenly felt by all those who crossed his threshold. As someone put it, "Reb Shlomo didn't love people in spite of their shortcomings, but because of them. He viewed these weaknesses as tools by which one could climb and grow." אלמלא נפלתי לא קמתי "If I had not fallen, I could not get up."

Reb Shlomo's example served as an object lesson for my students: *Ahavas Yisroel* is not measured by how we treat the special people who are our friends as much as by how we treat ordinary people. It was through Reb Shlomo's commitment to such people that his Yeshiva came into being. While *yeshivos* are usually built with a nucleus of exceptional people who serve as its core, Reb Shlomo's design was for young men who had difficulty succeeding within the yeshiva system.

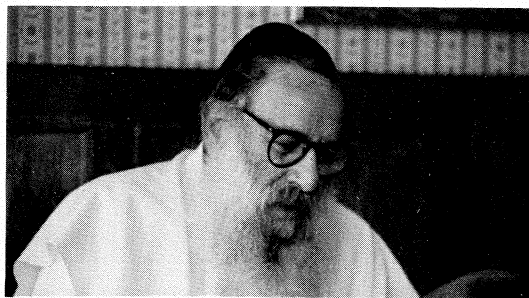
"He was a magician," one *talmid* said to me. "He took wood and made it human. Look at me!" And, indeed, he did just that. Any of the hundreds of *talmidim* that make up the magnificent Sh'or Yoshuv community marvel at the stories of their own youth.

In time, *baalei teshuva* found their way to Sh'or Yoshuv as well. In Reb Shlomo, they found extraordinary patience and understanding.

*During Shiva, I overheard a young baalas teshuva speaking to one of Reb Shlomo's daughters. "I produce commercials," she explained. "Popular consumer items, you know, like soft drinks."*

*Afterwards, someone commented on the incongruity of her remarks in Reb Shlomo's dining room. "On the contrary," an old friend countered, "every Jew belonged in Reb Shlomo's dining room. Professions, like disguises, were set aside."*

*Reb Shlomo did not wait to be approached. One currently respect-*



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*able member of the Sh'or Yoshuv community joined the fold when he was picked up from the street, where he was literally lost, and taken to the Freifeld home. Cleaned up and fed, the young man regained his composure, became attracted to Torah, and developed as a dedicated masmid. For Mother's Day, he wanted to give his mother a treat, but didn't want to miss learning—so he invited her to spend the day in Far Rockaway, to see what he had become.*

Reb Shlomo always focused on *chizuk*, encouragement, and the universal need for it. Whenever a *kinus* (Torah conference) took place, he would only want to know one thing: did the people go away strengthened, encouraged? He was especially concerned about how the women fared. He often commented that when the Chiddushei HaRim had lost his many children, he gathered women to pray. "Women are *Malchus*, royalty," he would say. "They have a special *ko'ach*, special powers."

He would always make sure that they had the spiritual sustenance they needed: "They are so self-sacrificing in their efforts to promote the Torah values of their families. Make sure their needs are met."

### "DON'T BE STRONG..."

A disciple of Rav Yitzchok Hutner זצ"ל, and heir to the Slobodka philosophy of *romemus ha'adam*—the lofty potential of man—Reb Shlomo recognized that capacity for growth was closely tied to self-esteem. Regardless of the problem or the difficulty, Reb Shlomo felt that if one could elevate the person, he could then transcend his problem. If one focused on the problem, however, it was likely that it would continue to keep the person hostage.

When dealing with a wounded *neshama*, Reb Shlomo would focus on the person's capacity for growth. "Don't be strong," he would say, "be big"—recognizing that not everyone, nor every situation, had the potential for strength; but there was always an opportunity for greatness, if one could take a broader view.

In dealing with problems, Reb Shlomo demonstrated a sense of humor that would anesthetize the anxiety of the person and allow him to be more open to growth. Motivation and exaltation, then, were the keys to growth, not rules and criticism. This, too, was in line with the teachings of his great *Rebbe*, Rav Hutner, who would quote the Tal-

mud that tells us that generations ago *tochacha* (productive reproof) was abandoned because man became incapable of maintaining a healthy perspective about criticism: he would lose his self-esteem in face of fault finding. And without self-esteem, there is no basis for a relationship with the *Ribbono Shel Olam*. It was to this building of *ga'avo dekedusha*—pride in holiness—that Reb Shlomo committed himself. It seemed to me that this was his motivation when he would always insist that his students be taught to master one line at a time. This approach, known by his disciples as “The System,” was true on all levels. In the primary grades, small children mastered one line of *Siddur* or *Chumash* at a time. I asked an old *talmid* whether Reb Shlomo ever gave a *shiur* to the *Gemora* class.

“Yes,” he replied smiling, “he taught me.”

“How did he do it?” I asked—then interrupting myself: “Let me guess. One line at a time!”

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**S**tudents are willing to struggle if there would be a greater payoff, if they could become great scholars, perhaps. Reb Shlomo was there to remind one and all that it was all worth it... for one line.

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He nodded.

I always had thought that “The System” was designed to give the student confidence and to set down solid foundations.

It occurred to me recently that he may have had a deeper reason, one that penetrated the mindset of the developing yeshiva student. He wanted there to be no doubt in anyone’s mind as to the importance of one line. Torah learning is filled with challenge, and the struggle with investment-versus-yield. As a *Rebbe* myself, I have often heard students express their willingness to struggle if there would be a greater payoff, if they could become great scholars, perhaps. Reb Shlomo was there to remind one and all that it was all worth it...for one line.

I remember Reb Shlomo’s frustration at a meeting of yeshiva principals that gathered at his home several years ago. All he had wanted from them was to make sure that no student failed. It was hard for him, because they focused on “reality orientation” and he had a sense of reality all his own. Success builds upon success, not failure, and he saw it as his mandate to convince everyone that they could succeed.

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### MANY MEDIA FOR THE MESSAGE OF GREATNESS

**R**eb Shlomo communicated many a profound message through music. Many years ago, Reb Shlomo was teaching eighth grade boys in another city. He peered through the window during lunch time and saw his students emerging from a non-kosher restaurant. When they returned to class, he silently distributed *Zemiros* booklets to them, and sang with them, “*Racheim bechasdecha...* Have compassion in Your kindness...,” over and over, until one student got up and said, “Rebby, if I felt this way all the time, I would never eat *treif*.”

Reb Shlomo served his Creator with beauty. Everything around him reflected the grandeur of life. The walls of his home were a feast for the eyes: fascinating paintings, photographs, and artifacts—each reflecting some theme of the spirit’s reach. It was obvious that he was always trying, in ways subtle as well as

sweeping, to teach his children and students to delve deeply into their feelings and thoughts. Emotions and their language, poetry, were always alive in conversations with Reb Shlomo. He was in touch with his own feelings and willing to share them. One Rosh HaShana he spoke to his crowded *Beis Midrash* about making a commitment to fulfill the *mitzva* of reviewing the weekly Torah portion. “And I know your weaknesses,” he bellowed, “because I know my own.” It was obvious at that moment how he had built his community.

### FOCUS ON OTHERS

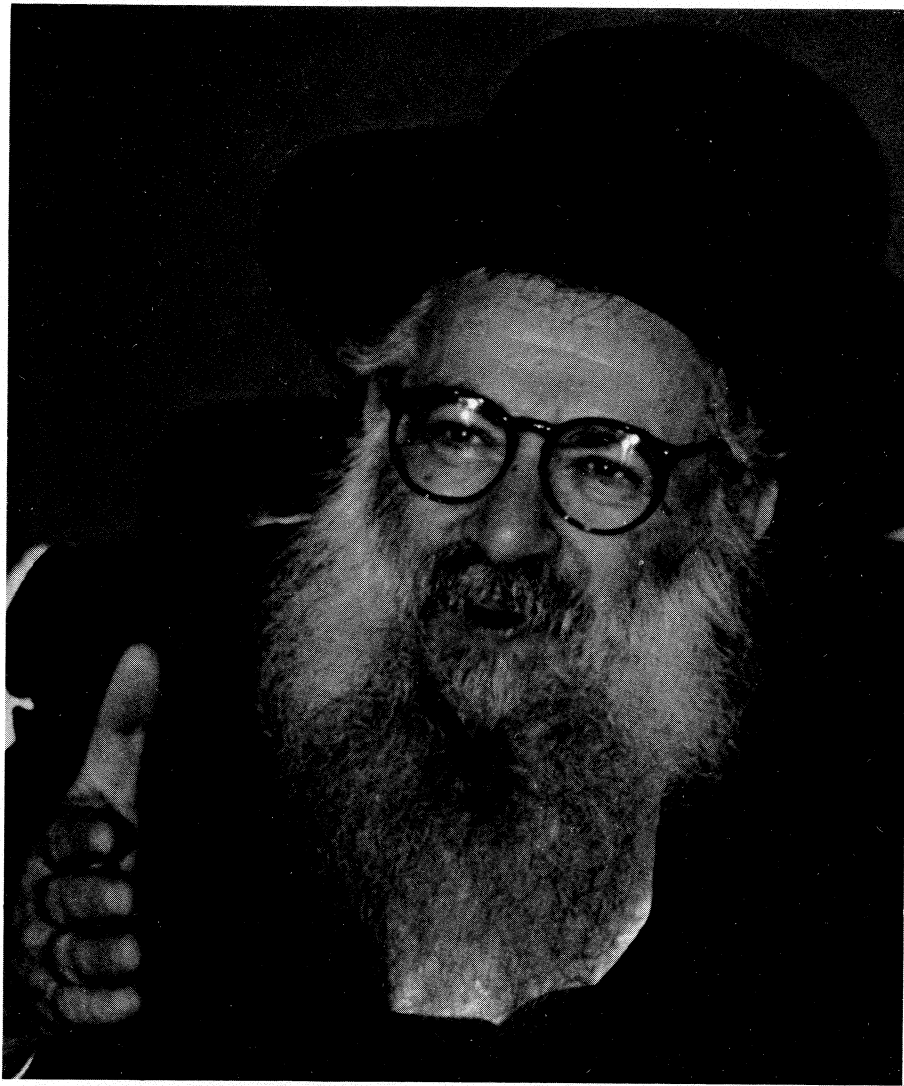
**I**n sickness as in health, Reb Shlomo’s primary focus was on the well-being of whoever came to visit him. When speaking to Reb Shlomo, one had the feeling of being held, supported, uplifted. His fatherly embrace was unique. The Talmud states that while the average person can only retrieve his lost

object by naming its identifying characteristics, a Torah scholar can retrieve it on the simple basis of recognition, for a *talmid chacham* is credited with having *tevias ayin*—his discerning eye can be depended upon to identify the lost object. Similarly, this doctor of *neshamos* (as Reb Shlomo was called) could identify what was lost to someone else’s soul without any particular sign or signal.

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"Fulfill '*yasichena*' with me," he would say, inviting the petitioner to follow the advice of *Shlomo Hamelech*, and relieve himself of his worries by sharing it with others.

#### FAREWELL AT SHALOSH SEUDOS

It was ironic that Reb Shlomo was *niftar* at his *Shalosh Seudos* table, for that was the scene of Reb Shlomo at his best. אשׁרי אדם עוז לו בך מסילות בלבבם "Fortunate is he whose strength is in You, whose Torah makes inroads into their heart," he would say at *Shalosh Seudos*, as he addressed a gathering of disciples and guests—giving them fuel for the coming week, with road maps for those "inroads into the heart." In truth, all times were affairs of the heart for Reb Shlomo.

With Reb Shlomo's passing, we have been orphaned. "Everyone who was exposed to Reb Shlomo caught a ray," his daughter said. Although it feels as though he took the light with him, he indeed did leave hundreds of people ignited with his flame, reflecting his glow. His community, and all of us, have lost a *Rebbe*, a father, a leader. But perhaps most of all, we have lost our best friend. ■