

Wings WITH WHICH TO Fly .

THE GIFTS OF RAV SHLOMO FREIFELD, ztz"l

by Yisroel Besser

It was the late 1960s and America was collectively shrugging off the burdens of modesty and the shackles of decency. Freedom and love, unrestricted and unfettered, became the goal, and any lifestyle which required adherence to a specific code of behavior was an archaic relic of a sorry past. It was certainly not the time to open a new yeshivah, to pull *neshamos* towards the structure and demands of Torah life.

Yet, at this juncture in history stepped forth a giant of a man, uniquely suited to the challenges, needs, and emotions of a new generation. With tenderness and warmth, he spread his arms wide and embraced all those struggling souls. He gave them love and he gave them freedom. He revealed the beauty and the splendor that resided within them, exposing them to the depth and meaning they so craved. He looked at them with eyes so positive, so filled with optimism and confidence, that they eagerly awaited the opportunity to be seen by him, knowing that the way he looked at them would change the way they looked at themselves.

Rav Shlomo Freifeld spawned a unique movement, one in which terms like "*baal teshuvah*" or "F.F.B." became irrelevant; for, in his own words, "Torah is *nachalas haklal*, the legacy of the nation as a whole," and any member of that nation that stepped forth and said, "Teach me," was welcome.

In truth, they didn't have to say the words "teach me," for he had an uncanny ability to measure the true depths of a soul with one loving gaze. A pioneering *talmid* described his interview for acceptance into the nascent Yeshivas Sh'or Yeshuv, after being asked to leave his old yeshivah. The Rosh Yeshivah asked only one question.

"Do you want to learn?" The sarcasm of the answer cannot be described on paper. "Yeah, right!" snarled the boy.

The Rosh Yeshivah saw past the bitter cynicism, hearing only the plea for help

that lay beneath it. "Great, then you're in," he said brightly, thus ushering a *talmid* into his yeshivah and into his life.

From the outset, the yeshivah that he created was unique. Three days into that first *zman*, Rebbe looked candidly at where his *talmidim* were holding, and closed his Gemara. "Come, let us learn some Mishnayos together." For the next few weeks, he learned the first few Mishnayos in *Zevachim* with his boys, again and again. The grandiose dreams of most *roshei yeshivah*, of incisive *shiurim*, of brilliant *chaburos*, were left outside, for *his* dream was only to give them a taste of the joy of learning, of comprehending words of Torah.

Today, some thirty-five years later, one of those *talmidim* began to recite those Mishnayos from memory. "It was the first time that I really learned anything in my life. We did those Mishnayos until they were in our bones. Then we did them again."

In that story, one hears an echo of something the Rosh Yeshivah once told a close *talmid*. He described how, on a Friday night as a *bochur* in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, he had entered a neighborhood shul to daven Maariv. He was early, and began to learn from a Mishnayos sitting on the table. It was an unfamiliar *masechta*, and he was troubled by several questions. He learned it again and again, plumbing the depths of the Mishnah, exerting himself until he tasted the sweet taste of accomplishment born of toil. "At that moment, I had a flash of understanding. I realized that, here I was, in a yeshivah filled with *iluyim*, listening to a *shiur* from a brilliant *rosh yeshivah*, rushing with the tide, accomplishing according to other people's standards, never taking the time to really work out something *on my own*. On that *leil Shabbos*, I learned that *ich hob oich a keppela*, I can also think for myself."

The Rosh Yeshivah recalled that precious moment, telling the *talmid*, "... and that's a key point of *chinuch*;

helping people realize that 'they have a *keppelah*.'"

After a few weeks of *Zevachim*, the Rosh Yeshivah began to expand his repertoire, returning to Gemara. Reb Benjy Brecher recalls how Rebbe would circulate in the *beis medrash* all day, calling *bochurim* over privately. "Read this for me," he would say, listening intently to their reading, perceiving that a difficulty in reading is the greatest obstacle to enjoying learning. He didn't consider it beneath him to coach them, correct them, patiently discern the causes for the mistakes, and ultimately tell them that they were ready for the next step. "It's time for you to go daven from the *amud*."

A CONNECTION WITH THE SOURCE OF ALL LIFE

But he did far more for these boys than merely teach them how to read, or to daven; he taught them how to live, how a Yid thinks. He had an early morning *seder* with a *talmid*, simply to shmooze. "I would come to his house at five-thirty in the morning, and we would have a coffee together, chatting about various events in the news. He didn't preach, he just shared his perspective on these issues."

Similarly, a *talmid* recalled how through those mundane conversations, Rebbe connected him with life, and ultimately with the Source of all Life. "Sometimes, on a 'slow day,' he would tell one of us, or a group of us, to jump into the car. We would drive, often to Biegeleisen's seforim store on the Lower East Side, sometimes up into the mountains, enjoying his company." Rav Shmuel Brazil, who eventually taught an entire generation the sound of songs permeated with *neshamah*, recalls the spirited singing on those trips, as Rebbe would teach them old *nigunim*. Rebbe would also simply chat with them, but "his entire conversation was layered with meaning and depth, and he knew how to slip his message in to these conversations, changing us

through this slower, subtler, process. It made us into Yidden."

Many years later a *talmid* recalled those excursions as "the most pleasant hours of my life. When we were with him, everything was open for discussion, yet everything was holy, sublime. He translated his wonder and appreciation at the splendor of this world into feelings of inspiration, inspiring all of us along with him. Once, deep in the mountains, we saw a sparkling clear blue stream. Rebbe asked us to excuse him for a moment, exclaiming enthusiastically, 'I doubt if anyone ever immersed themselves in this brook since the beginning of time. I must go *toivel*!'"

In later years, when Sh'or Yeshuv had a bungalow colony of its own, he would sit at the campfire with his *talmidim* surrounding him, singing songs of *dveikus*, unlocking their souls. When the mood was right, he would invite them to ask their questions. The doubts and uncertainties would roll off their hearts and into the fire as he spoke, answering, clarifying, and illuminating the night with his words.

One year, when the yeshivah arrived at their summer home, the cook complained to him that the kitchen was a disgraceful mess. That night, while she slept, the Rosh Yeshivah gathered together a large group of *bochurim* and ushered them into the kitchen. He rolled up his sleeves and dispensed the jobs; together they swept, scoured, and polished. They also spoke, joked, and while the *talmidim* reveled in their proximity to him, he oversaw the whole operation, complimenting this one, helping that one, commenting on the work of a third. His presence filled the room, making the entire experience pure joy for those privileged enough to be there. When they were done, he thanked them. "We may be a poor yeshivah," Rebbe said, "but that doesn't mean that we can't be a clean one!"

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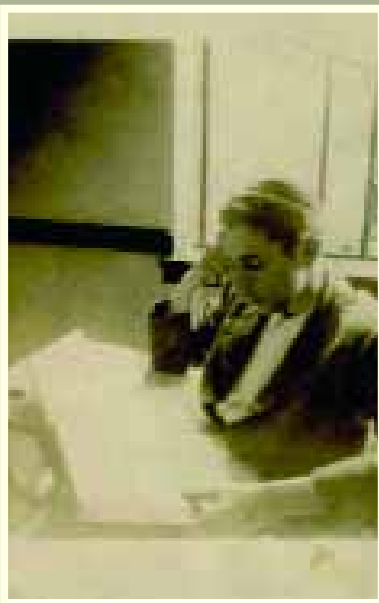


It's the way they utter the word, "Rebbe." It's like a bittersweet song, one of longing mixed with delight. The intonation of the word, the reverence and passion with which they say it, hints at the emotion expressed by Chazal that 'tov atah l'Yisrael mei'av v'eim,' you, Rebbe, are more precious to us than a father and a mother. Indeed, for the talmidim of Rav Shlomo Freifeld, he was all that and much more: a father, a mother, and a best friend. He was Rebbe.



Rav Shlomo, ztz"l, with, yblc"t, Rav Aharon Schechter on a visit to Jerusalem

“I faced many obstacles, and I triumphed over all of them. I faced difficult hurdles, but they never overtook me. Do you know why? It’s because I had one chassid who never stopped believing in me. Myself”



Rebbe as a young bochur

A NESHAMAH WITH THE POWER TO EMBRACE His *neshamah* had an extraordinary ability to bond with another, and there was no external form of connection that was beneath him. To this one he spoke about herring, to another about cigars, and to yet another about military strategy. The medium made no difference; he knew how to connect with them.

Not only with his *talmidim*, but with any Jew. Reb Yussie Lieber was a long-time rebbe in an afternoon Hebrew school for mostly secular kids. He once brought his students to meet Rebbe. They stood around the table, cautious, uneasy, uncertain, as he began to speak.

“What’s your name?” he asked the first one.

“Charlie,” replied the boy.

“No, not Charlie. I want your Jewish name,” prodded Rebbe, ever so gently.

“Oh, it’s Chaim.”

Rebbe beamed at him. “Do you realize what a potent name you have? Life...sparks of life, of perpetual movement and growth...”

Then Rebbe continued, revealing to David and Ilana, to Erez and Hadassah, the splendor of their names. Once he had generated a current powerful enough to have aroused dormant sparks in these *neshamos*, he smiled broadly. “At my *bris milah*, circumcision, my father named me Shlomo, yet my mother still preferred to call me Seymour. Don’t let the hat and beard fool you. I was Seymour, not Shlomo.”

Rebbe paused, letting the idea sink in. “Life is an evolution, not a revolution. We have to work to tap into the unlimited potential of our names, but it’s a mission that’s within our reach. Today I am a Shlomo.”

WE ARE BROTHERS Nothing was beneath him if it could achieve the desired effect. A beloved *talmid* was suffering from a terminal illness, and was hospitalized in St. Louis, over Rosh HaShanah. Rebbe sent two *talmidim* to spend the Yom Tov with him, and along with them, a gift for the patient. The *talmid* was a baseball fan and Rebbe knew just the way to bring a smile to his face. He sent a baseball, upon which he wrote, “*Refuah Sheleimah*...Shlomo ‘Babe’ Freifeld.”

He was never afraid to be human with them. In later years, one of his close *talmidim* accompanied the *aron* of Rav Shlomo’s rebbeztin to *kvurah* in Eretz Yisrael, and when he returned to America he made his way directly to Rebbe’s home. The room was filled

with distinguished *roshei yeshivos* who had come to be *menachem avel*, and Rav Shlomo introduced this *talmid* by saying “*achim b’tzarah*, brothers in anguish.” He had drawn his beloved *talmid* into his own suffering, allowing him to share his Rebbe’s distress.

The pain of the *talmidim* was his pain. He once had to break news to a *talmid*, news so devastating that it had the potential to ruin the life of this beloved *talmid*. Rebbe prefaced his words—words that he knew would feel like hammer blows to the heart—with a reminder that “*Anashim achim anachnu*, we are brothers.” Only after letting the *talmid* know that they were “in it together,” that he had someone that shared his anguish, would he tell him the news.

Several times during the conversation, he asked the *talmid* to hold on for a moment. Years later someone who was in the Rebbe’s room at the time told this *talmid* that Rebbe would put the phone down and begin to sob uncontrollably, and only resume the conversation when he felt ready to be encouraging and hopeful.

He connected with them as friends, joking with them, yet the closer they became with him, the more their awe and reverence for him increased. A *talmid* recalled how a nucleus of early *talmidim* decided to begin wearing *bekeshes*, a special *begeid l’chavod Shabbos*. Rav Shlomo had never asked them to, and they didn’t come from chassidic homes, but “being around him, we were attuned to the sanctity and holiness of Shabbos, and it seemed the most natural thing to do.”

A HOME OF ROYALTY The home that he and his rebbeztin created was as much a part of the yeshivah as the *beis medrash* and the dormitory, and for years, the yeshivah had no dining room. It was customary for the older *bochurim* returning to yeshivah after a date to go directly to his house to discuss it with him. They were still coming at one o’clock, and at five-thirty in the morning Rebbe’s first *chavrusah* of the new day was usually waiting downstairs.

The yeshivah slowly grew around him, but the married *talmidim* wouldn’t leave him, opting to settle in Far Rockaway, where their relationship with him could continue. “There was no other way, because he wasn’t a Rebbe that you called when you had a problem; he was Rebbe, who carried you on his shoulders.” In addition, the

exposure of these young couples to the unique relationship between the Rosh Yeshivah and his rebbeztin, and eventually with his second rebbeztin, *shetichyeh*, was a glimpse at the potential of the Jewish marriage to transcend pettiness and ego. “It was a magnificent partnership, his marriage embodied royalty.”

Slowly, a community was being created around him; in many ways, the first of its kind. His Rebbe, Rav Yitzchak Hutner, once commented that while other *manhigim* had been successful in creating communities on these shores, they were recreating the European *kehillos* of old. Rav Shlomo created the first American *kehillah*. The wives and children in this new community were treated the same as his *talmidim*, indeed, those children were his *eineklach*, and he was thoroughly familiar with each of them.

THROUGH EYES FILLED WITH LOVE People gravitated to him, needing to be seen through his eyes, knowing that his *ayin tovah*, believing as he did in the unlimited potential of each *neshamah*, had the ability to lift them. He himself would frequently quote the words of the Ramban in *parshas Bereishis*, who explains that when it says “*Vayar*,” that Hashem “saw,” it means that He wanted the *kiyum*, the continued growth, of the creation. In that Divine glance, lay the command for continuation, the will of the One who looked, becoming the medium for its existence. When we look at someone, we should view him from a Divine perspective, conveying our hope for his continued growth. Hence, the secret of his unique *koach* to imbue people with a sense of purpose and self-worth by simply looking at them.

Someone once referred to him as “charismatic.” He took offense, telling a *talmid* that, “at the bank, when they want to shut off the yeshivah’s electricity, then I’m charismatic, but not with Yidden.” He resented the implication that there was something artificial or contrived about his relationships with *talmidim*; it wasn’t charisma that drew them to him. It was genuine love.

His great rebbe, Rav Hutner, once remarked to Rav Moshe Shapiro, “Other rebbes distribute *shirayim* of food; Rav Shlomo distributes *shirayim* of *chayim*, particles of life.”

In a *shmuess*, he once quoted the *pasuk* of “*V’atah mechayeh es kulam*, You give life to every living creature,”

commenting that in this respect as well, we say *mah Hu af atah*, we have to strive to emulate the Creator.

He believed in them, and insisted that they believe in themselves. He once told a close *talmid* that “I faced many obstacles, and I triumphed over all of them. I faced difficult hurdles, but they never overtook me. Do you know why? It’s because I had one chassid who never stopped believing in me. Myself.”

There was a *talmid* of his who disappointed him deeply, falling into a situation and refusing Rebbe’s repeated offers of help. Rebbe invested tremendous energy and much precious time in the rehabilitation of this individual, but his efforts were for naught. One day, this *talmid* came to visit Rebbe, on a day when Rebbe was feeling particularly weak. The *talmid* who opened the door informed him that Rebbe was unable to receive him at that time. The fellow began to argue, insisting that it was essential that he see Rebbe. Finally, he explained why it was so crucial, “Just watch. You will see from the smile on Rebbe’s face when I walk into the room just how happy I make him...”

He always preferred to focus on the positive. A *talmid* bemoaned his pitiful spiritual state one *erev Yom Kippur*, saying, “Rebbe, I feel so guilty.”

The reply was a roar. “You’re innocent. Do you hear? You’re innocent!”

Rebbe quoted the Chiddushei Harim, who, on *erev Yom Kippur* warned his flock that “if you roll in the mud, then you get dirty.”

“Move on,” said Rebbe. “There’s so much positive to focus on, such a brilliant future. *Sur mei’ra*, don’t get caught up in the *aveiros*, and *asei tov*, look at all the good that you will yet do...you’re not guilty at all. You’re innocent.”

He once commented that, while in Novardok they were able to learn one type of *mussar*, “here in America, the *mussar* has to be ‘you’re so wonderful, you’re so special...’”

Not that he ignored the flaws, the darker side of the human heart. He simply waited for an opportune time to address them. A *talmid* in the yeshivah missed Shacharis for two consecutive days.

“I missed you,” said Rebbe.

“Where were you?” is what the *talmid* heard; accusation rather than affection. He answered with a flat lie, thus closing the conversation, and ending the confrontation.

Six months later, Rebbe called in this *talmid*. “Do you remember six months

ago I asked you about Shacharis?” he asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Do you recall that you said something untrue?”

“Yes,” replied the boy.

The room was quiet. “Why did Rebbe wait so long to mention it?” asked the boy, anguished that he had sullied his relationship with Rebbe through the falsehood. “Six months ago,” Rebbe replied, “you had not yet grown ears. Now you have ears...”

I KNOW THAT YOU CAN DO IT He knew intuitively what people needed to hear, which buttons to press to set a soul in motion. Once, he was a guest at a hotel, when an emotionally unbalanced individual, who happened to be a diabetic, collapsed. Immediately, a crowd gathered around, with various medical solutions being offered: “Give him insulin,” “Pour water on his face,” “Perform CPR.” Rav Shlomo realized immediately that it wasn’t medical; it was emotional.

He strode over and whispered in his ear, “Get up, Yankel, go daven Minchah.”

Yankel opened his eyes and looked at him. “Do you really think that I can, Rebbe?”

“Yes,” replied Rebbe.

Yankel stood up.

He connected with people in a way that transcended mere words or expressions, for he knew how to embrace the *neshamah*.

Rav Eliyahu Essas, one of the original Russian refuseniks, came to hear Rav Shlomo during *shalosh seudos*, when Rav Shlomo was visiting Yerushalayim. When Rav Essas entered the room, Rebbe looked at him, and tears filled his eyes. He rose and embraced the visitor, holding him close. Rav Essas later told a *talmid* that “I had a sense that this Jew understood all the suffering that I had undergone in my life.”

How he understood people! He perceived their needs, hopes, and dreams. A great *rosh yeshivah* was once asked to elaborate on the difference between Rav Hutner and Rav Shlomo, the Rebbe and the *talmid*. “Rav Hutner, with his great mind, was able to understand the heart of another. Rav Shlomo, with his great heart, was able to understand the mind of another.”

On his extended visit to Eretz Yisrael in the early 1950s, he was *zocheh* to meet with the Chazon Ish for three hours, an encounter from which he drew ►►

sustenance for the rest of his life. Among other things, the Chazon Ish had commented that “a *gadol* is like a perfect circle. Just as a larger circle encompasses a greater area within it, so too, a greater *gadol* can encompass more people within him.” His circle was ever expanding, constantly growing to provide refuge to the many souls who found shelter in its embrace.

A newlywed opened his heart to Rebbe. Though both he and his new wife comprehended the intrinsic beauty and meaning in the halachos of covering hair, he wasn’t ready to have his wife wear a head covering.

“I have always had a picture in my head, the way that I had imagined my wife would look, and I am unable to part with it...”

Rebbe leaned across the table, speaking with passion and force. “I have been to Paris and back. If a person chooses to live his life within the four *amos* of halachah, then his basic instincts will change as well...”

EVERY JEW THAT YOU SEE He cherished every Yid. While driving with Reb Dovid Sitnick, the *menahel* of Siach Yitzchok, just days before Rebbe’s *petirah*, they passed by two Yidden. “In our times, *yeder Yid voss mir zeit, m’darfim arummen un geben a kush*, we should embrace every Jew that we see, and give them a kiss!” he exclaimed with emotion.

He was sitting in his succah with a large group of *talmidim* during the Yom Kippur war when someone made a disparaging remark about the soldiers, commenting that they didn’t keep the mitzvos. Rebbe pounded on the table, and thundered his protest. “Remember, we were at the forty-ninth level of *tumah*, in the depths of impurity, and a mere seven weeks later we stood at Har Sinai. Be careful how you talk about a Yid!”

His view of individual Yidden was colored in the richest colors, and even their failings and struggles were viewed from that perspective. A rebbe in Siach Yitzchok was having a difficult year; his class was comprised of difficult, unruly children. One day, as he prepared to enter the class, perhaps just a tad warily, the resonant voice of Rebbe boomed, “Remember, *da shetarchanim heim, sarvanim heim*, they are difficult, they are uncooperative, *al m’nas shetekabel alechah*,” a reference to the words of Chazal, when Moshe appointed Yehoshua. A leader of Yidden accepts his lofty calling with the understanding that at times the Yidden are troublesome.

That rebbe entered the room with a smile, knowing that such is the lot of those

privileged enough to lead Yidden, and always has been so.

ONLY WITH SIMCHAH The fountain of *simchah* that seemed to emanate from deep within him made those moments spent in his presence especially pleasant ones, for he knew how to derive the maximum joy from every second of life. During his last meeting with Rav Hutner before the latter’s *petirah*, Rav Shlomo asked him “*B’eizeh derech yishkon*, How does one acquire light?” The answer was simple, “*M’darf zein freilech*, you have to be joyous.”

He told a close *talmid* how Rav Nachman of Breslov is known to have said that a person has to strengthen himself continuously, to live in a perpetual state of renewal, living with a constant vision of a new world. “And I find that I must begin anew every few minutes!”

Even though he was Rebbe, selflessly devoted to his *talmidim* and their welfare, leaving very little of his time for himself, he was very much an individual, climbing his own personal ladder to greatness. He once commented in a speech that, “Bnei Brak was built by two giants. One was the Chazon Ish, and the other was the *ish chazon*, the man of vision, the great Ponevezher Rav. A person should embody both strengths within him, that of the Chazon Ish—an awareness of the heights that a lone individual, closeted in his room, can scale—and that of the *ish chazon*, a vision of how one Yid can affect the entire nation.”

He was constantly in pursuit of “*gadlus hamochin*,” a state of expanded awareness. He pursued *chochmah*, wisdom, relentlessly, and the words he used to be *maspid* his rebbe, applied to him as well. He said that Rav Hutner was an example of the words of the *pasuk* that “*ha-chochmah techayeh ba’aleiha*, wisdom can regenerate its possessors.”

He would often dream of sublime experiences, and once related to Reb Dovid Sitnick how the previous night he had beheld the *nahar hayotzei mei’Eden*, the river going forth from Eden,” in his dream. In that dream, he had remarked, “*al hanahar hazeh hispalalti*,” playing on the words of Chanah, the mother of Shmuel. A telling incident.

Though he was always expressive, there are times that stand out in the minds of his *talmidim* as unforgettable, for it was then that he would give free rein to his emotions, allowing them to flow unchecked.

They will never forget that Rosh HaShanah, when at the completion of the tefillos, as a wave of joy and optimism washed over the crowd, he asked them to



With his rebbe Rav Hutner, ztz”l, in Sh’or Yoshuv



Dancing with Rav Aharon Schechter in his final years



sing. The melody that burst forth from the assemblage was like no other, an ode of gratitude and prayer. The Rebbe pulled his *tallis* over his face, and with superhuman strength, rose from the confines of his wheelchair to a place above time and space. He began to dance alone, as hundreds of *talmidim*, children that he created, fostered, and raised to greatness, were spurred on to sing louder. He was parting from them amid joy. Not long after, he was *niftar*.

They will never forget his lofty optimism each *motzaei Yom Kippur*, when he would sit, surrounded by his *talmidim*, singing and dancing until the early morning, exulting in the

atmosphere of purity that only a newly cleansed *neshamah* can sense. He would sing all sorts of songs, among them a song that one of the *bochurim* had brought from Eretz Yisrael, with the words “*od tireh kama tov yehiyeh bashanah habaah*.” When he would sing those words, expressing the promise for a better year, tears would flow down his cheeks, for that was his mission; next year will be better, we will grow, we will never look back.

Another experience that will forever be seared on the hearts of his *talmidim*, is Simchas Torah morning, the one time a year that he would daven before the *amud*. Then, the wellsprings of gratitude

within him would burst forth, and he would cry out the words of Hallel, weeping profusely.

“*Aza a lichtige velt*, what a glorious world,” was an oft-repeated refrain, and when he heard about a petty argument, he would say, “it’s such a glorious world. Why do they seek to make it small and narrow?” He toiled mightily to uncover the brilliant depths hidden in every situation, and those close to him testify how during the difficult period when his first rebbetzin was ill, or when he himself suffering through his illness, he constantly sought to rise above the situation, to be “*derhoiben*.”

He had a phenomenal sense of humor, and he used it freely. A *talmid* once came to his home on *erev Rosh HaShanah*, and was greeted by the sound of hysterical laughter. He entered the kitchen to see the Rosh Yeshivah, confined to a wheelchair, cracking jokes for his rebbetzin and some guests, not even giving them a chance to catch their breath. It was *erev Rosh HaShanah*, and here was a Jew who was singing his *shirah*, thanking the Almighty for another year of life.

Rebbe was once in the bank, and as he approached the teller she blurted out, “My, you’re the tallest rabbi that I’ve ever met!” She told him that there was a notation on his account from the bank manager that when he had a minute, he should please come upstairs. When he completed his business, he went upstairs where the manager welcomed him. “I am just reviewing your account, Rabbi Freifeld, and it seems that you’re a little bit short.”

Rebbe turned to his companion. “Do you hear? Downstairs they think I’m so tall, but upstairs, they know that I’m too short...”

WHERE ARE YOU He viewed each moment of life as significant, loaded with meaning and potential, and had the ability to communicate that vision to others. He knew how to paint the situation in dramatic colors, highlighting the responsibility to invest it with holiness.

A *talmid* accepted a position as a rebbe in a distant community, and quickly realized that he wasn’t suited to the job. He called Rav Shlomo in tears, explaining that two months had already passed, and he had no control in his classroom, no hope of teaching Torah. He informed Rebbe of his plans to resign immediately and return to New York.

“Where are you calling from?” asked Rebbe.

“From my house,” replied the *talmid*.

“But from where?” persisted Rebbe.

“From California,” came the reply.

“No!” bellowed Rebbe. “You are in

Leningrad! No one is allowed to teach Torah or even mention Judaism, but the government has made an exception; they have given you six months to go fill the eager minds of the children with the truth, and then you must leave. Each day is precious; this is the only chance for the children. It’s an emergency situation and you have to use emergency tactics...you are in *Leningrad*.”

Then Rebbe turned to the more practical aspects of the problem. “On Sunday, which is your day off, go visit each child at home; chat with him, listen to him, connect with him, and keep a notebook of each one’s progress. Do this each Sunday until there is an improvement.”

That rebbe excelled, and today is a respected and successful *mechanech*.

I’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT YOU

Though the Rosh Yeshivah was a highly emotional person, he was eminently practical, taking the feelings of the people around him into account. A close *talmid* related how, at the conclusion of the *chuppah* at his wedding, he immediately approached Rebbe to give him a kiss. His *simchah* was at its peak, and he wanted to share the special moment with the one who had orchestrated his growth. Rav Shlomo was smiling broadly, and had these words to share; “Go back and kiss your mother first.”

Rebbe called in a close *talmid* one morning in the bungalow colony. Crowned with his tefillin, enveloped in his *tallis*, he looked angelic. The *talmid* stood there, awaiting some profound revelation, a message from the higher spheres. Rebbe prefaced his remarks, as he so often did, by saying “I’ve been thinking about you lately. You have been especially tense, and I want to let you know that if you don’t play basketball every single day this summer, it will be a big mistake.”

His thoughts went to them first, and during his most difficult moments, their well-being was uppermost in his mind. In his last years, as he battled valiantly with illness, he was very often weak, and a bed was placed in his office. One night, as he lay there, racked with pain, every breath a struggle, Reb Razel Stone noticed Rebbe motioning him over. He approached Rebbe, who was murmuring something to him, exerting himself for each word. “If something happens to me, please don’t have *taanos*, grievances, on the *Ribono Shel Olam*...”

A *talmid* asked him how he could be a flexible husband without becoming a “doormat.” Rebbe answered him, “People say that it’s *shver tzu zein a Yid*, it is difficult to be a Jew. They are right, and the reason is because a Yid has a

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Behind his rebbe at Rav Hutner's daughter's chasunah

“*Od tireh kama tov yehiyeh bashanah habaah.*” When he would sing those words, expressing the promise for a better year, tears would flow down his cheeks, for that was his mission; next year will be better, we will grow, we will never look back



The chasunah of Rav Hutner's daughter

responsibility to be *misbonein*, to contemplate his course of action, to consider what is expected from him in each situation. There is no right answer, because you have to weigh each situation anew.”

Rebbe then shared a personal example. “Recently, I was going to the doctor, and my rebbetzin asked if I preferred to wear shoes or slippers. Though slippers were more comfortable, I wanted to wear shoes, so as not to feel like a *choleh*. I wanted to wear shoes to show *kavod* for myself, for the doctor, for the people in the waiting room.

Then I stopped to be *misbonein*. If I wore shoes, who would be the one to lace them? I certainly couldn't. My rebbetzin would have to bend down and do that for me. What about her *kavod*? I wore slippers.”

His *hashpaah*, influence, extended to all facets of his *talmidim*'s lives. Once, after a Friday night *seudah*, he called a *talmid* into his study. “I noticed tonight that while you enjoy your soup, you tend to slurp noisily. You will soon be looking for a *kallah*, and women are particularly sensitive to these types of things. Come, I will show you how one eats soup.”

Rav Shlomo was careful in his choice of words, and he kept a notebook in which he carefully filed away words or phrases that he enjoyed or that he thought could have an impact. A *talmid* explained that “Rebbe took words seriously, talk wasn't cheap by him. He was always seeking to make his message more potent, more effective.”

TORAH CAN SELL ITSELF He was tolerant and non-judgmental, but it wasn't a tolerance born out of naivete, in fact, says a *talmid*, “he hated *goyishkeit* with a passion.” Rather, he had endless confidence in the power of Torah to sell itself, and ultimately win over any competing influence. He once discussed an attempt to *assur*, to forbid, a certain pursuit. “If the only way that we can sell Torah is by rendering everything else forbidden, then we are bankrupt!” He knew that the light of Torah, “if taught correctly” would accomplish the job by itself.

A *talmid* spent a Shabbos at his bungalow on the Shabbos preceding the Woodstock festival of the late 1960s, one of the greatest gatherings of *hefkerus*, acting without regard to the existence of Hashem, in recent history. All Shabbos they watched throngs of hippies making their way through the Catskill roads, bound for Woodstock, and on *motzaei Shabbos* this *talmid*

excused himself and headed over there as well. When he returned after the event, Rebbe greeted him pleasantly, asking him questions about what he had seen. “He never condemned or criticized, for he knew exactly where I was holding. He accepted me, confident that his plans for my future would effectively heal my troubled soul.”

He later related to a *talmid* how, over that Shabbos he had spoken with many of those dusty, forlorn Woodstock-bound souls. He had joked with them and chatted with them, seeking only to awaken the feelings inspired by a glimpse of a Yid with a beard and *peyos*. “Outside I was smiling, but inside, I felt like it was Tisha B'Av.”

ASHREICHEM YISRAEL And how he loved Yiddishkeit, the richness and significance of *mesorah*, the glorious legacy of the Yidden from times past, that he would discuss with so much longing. Reb Refoel Franklin accompanied Rav Shlomo to Williamsburg one afternoon, and Rebbe told him to park the car on Lee Avenue, in the heart of the neighborhood.

“Look at the families, the children,” exulted Rav Shlomo. “The *mesorah* is *eingebaken in di beiner*, their bones are saturated with Yiddishkeit, with *tzniyus*, with *chein*...”

A WORLD OF INDIVIDUALS Rav Yosef Mashinsky spent seventeen years teaching in Siach Yitzchok, the cheder that Rav Shlomo founded in Far Rockaway, and had a unique vantage point on Rebbe's approach.

He shared a touching recollection, about a bright young *talmid* of his who was struggling with his reading. The boy was frustrated at his lack of progress, but kept trying. Eventually he mastered one *daf*, and Rav Shlomo asked that the child come to him to be tested. A few days later, Rav Shlomo presented the boy with a plaque, inscribed in a beautiful calligraphy. It read: “*If you know this amud, then you can know all of Shas. The next amud is not harder, it is just different. From Shlomo Freifeld.*”

Years earlier, as a *menahel* in Chaim Berlin, Rav Shlomo had already displayed that remarkable ability to relate to students as individuals. He once gave a *shmuess* to the students, urging them to complete the *mesechta* that they were studying. After the *shmuess*, a *talmid* approached him. “Rebbe,” he said, “you know that there is no way that I can complete an entire *mesechta*. I can barely read one line!” The next day, that *talmid* received a gift from Rav Shlomo:

a beautiful, leather-bound Gemara *Kesubos*, the *mesechta* that they were learning. The *talmid* opened it up, to see that it comprised one single page: *daf beis*, and that was it. “*This is your mesechta. Now go make a siyum...*”

A VISION SO HOPEFUL The deeper look, that ever-optimistic perspective, was part of who he was. A contemporary of Rav Shlomo's from Kollel Gur Aryeh, who is today a prominent *talmid chacham*, recalls how one morning the phone rang in the kollel. It was Rav Shlomo, and he was stranded on nearby St. John's Place, in Crown Heights, and needed help. They hurried over and saw how his car, a battered old jalopy, had stalled in the middle of a one-lane street, backing up traffic for blocks. They came to his aid, pushing the car as he steered it to the side.

The car made a feeble noise as he floored the gas pedal, but instead of parking it, they watched as he headed back into the flow of traffic. “Where are you going?” they asked incredulously. “To Williamsburg,” he replied. “How can you go, your battery has just died?” He floored the gas pedal and smiled broadly at them, “It didn't die; it just fainted.”

That friend will always remember Rav Shlomo's casual wave as he drove off. “It just fainted.” Those words would come to symbolize his life's mission; there was always possibility, potential, hope.

A HEART OVERFLOWING WITH AHAVAS YISRAEL Rav Mashinsky related another story, about another young *talmid* of his from Monsey. The boy had sustained serious damage to his optical nerve, *Rachmana latzlan*, and he was gradually losing his eyesight. The doctors felt that if he would exercise his eyes by reading, there was a chance that his eyesight could be saved. Rav Mashinsky expended great effort into teaching him to read, a painstaking and tedious process. Being from a chassidic home, the boy had a great appreciation for *tzaddikim*, and Rav Mashinsky promised him that if he would read two *blatt*, he would take him to visit a great *tzaddik*.

The boy kept his end of the deal, and when he had completed the *blatt*, Rav Mashinsky called Rebbe to make an appointment. Rav Shlomo, who was suffering from the advanced stages of his illness, was regretful; he simply had no strength. The next Sunday, he again apologized, explaining that he was in intense pain. Week after week Rav

Yosef Mashinsky would try, until one Friday the Rosh Yeshivah told him to come Sunday.

Sunday morning, the rebbe and his eager *talmid* drove to Far Rockaway. When they came to Rav Shlomo's house they were informed that he was in agony, and not receiving visitors. When Rebbe heard who was there, however, he invited them in.

Rav Mashinsky noticed the pain evident on Rebbe's face, but as soon as they entered his room, all traces of discomfort disappeared. He spread his arms wide and, with energy that he did not have, greeted them, speaking Yiddish in a rich chassidic dialect. “*Shoolim Aleichem*, what's your name?” “Shloime” replied the boy. Rebbe embraced him, and said “*Mein oichet*, mine, too.”

The boy began to read, and Rav Shlomo listened intently. Rav Mashinsky described the patience this entailed, as each word required tremendous concentration, yet the pain-ridden Rosh Yeshivah sat, enjoying every word.

After close to an hour, the boy completed an *amud*, and Rebbe began to praise him lavishly. Suddenly, he had an idea, and turned to Rav Mashinsky. “Reb Yosef, please go look on top of that seforim shelf, I should have a silver *yad*, a pointer used for reading the Torah, over there.” Rav Mashinsky searched, but could not locate the *yad*.

Rebbe wouldn't give up. “Roll me over,” he requested, and Rav Yosef wheeled Rebbe's wheelchair over to the shelf. The Rosh Yeshivah rose from his wheelchair, ignoring the difficulty, and reached on top of the shelf, locating the silver *yad*. He returned to the boy, and handed it to him. “Shloime, I think this will help you see the words better,” he said lovingly, “it's a present from me to you in recognition of your accomplishment.”

YOUR CHILDREN ARE YOUR MITZVOS Rav Shlomo was in a seforim store while visiting Yerushalayim. He overheard a customer in the store ask the owner if he carried “*Vallis tzitzis*,” a type of *tzitzis* made according to all the *hiddurim*, strict fulfillments of halachah. The owner replied that although he hadn't any of the *tzitzis* made by Reb Vallis, he had a similar type that also conformed to the various stringencies, such as being woven *lishmah*, for the sake for the mitzvah. “I have ‘*ke'ein Vallis*, like Vallis.’ ” The customer replied that those wouldn't

do, he needed Vallis. They began to argue, with the customer insisting on Vallis, and the proprietor trying to convince him that the others were made with just as much stringency.

After the incident, Reb Shlomo approached the customer and asked if he could ask him a question. “Who was your son's rebbe last year?” he asked. “I have several children, baruch Hashem, and it is difficult to recall,” replied the man apologetically.

“You are obviously someone who cherishes mitzvos and seeks to perform them in the most exemplary fashion,” Rav Shlomo said. “Don't you realize that your child's chinuch is your entire *metziyus*, essence, and those are the details which should be uppermost in your mind. Where are your priorities?”

REBBE AND ME The young son of a *talmid* accompanied his father to visit Rebbe, and Rebbe noticed that the child was holding a camera, trying to take a picture of him. “What kind of picture would it be without you in it?” he asked, and drew the boy close, posing together with him.

Years later the boy would look at the cherished picture, and recall an extraordinary moment with an extraordinary individual. “The picture of ‘Rebbe and me’ was a constant reminder of the perception and warmth of a giant, and it carried me through many difficult times. He saw so far...” ■

This is not the first series of interviews that I've conducted, nor is it the first time that I have had the privilege of writing about a gadol. It is, however, the first time that I've seen grown men weep like infants when recalling their Rebbe and those exalted moments in his presence. Because they are his talmidim, they have learned how to move on, to face the world with a smile, to “be big,” but it doesn't mean that they don't miss him.

“M'darf ufshtellen Yidden,” *he would say. Not just teach, nurture, or inspire. “Ufshtellen,” we have to build Yidden. He built them, gave them the tools, awareness and motivation to grow. Yes, he carried them, but he also showed them the greatness of themselves, giving them the gift of confidence, the strength to stand firm, and the wings with which to fly.*

It is the Yom Tov of “kasheh alei preidaschem ... it is so difficult to part from you.” For now, they have to comfort themselves by uttering that one word which brings with it instant peace, instant rapture. Rebbe ...