

CHAYEINU



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Aura of Greatness

Tribute to
Rav Shimon Alster zt”l,
Rosh Yeshivas Cliffwood.

“I was standing by his *shtender*, speaking to him together with a group of *talmidim*, when Rebbi commented, “Oy, I have to go now to another *chasunah*, my fourth of the week. I have no more *koach*.” But then he caught himself. “No, it may be my fourth *chasunah*, but for him, it’s once in a lifetime. Come let’s be *mesamei’ach* the *chassan*!”

Each one an Individual

Through decades of *chinuch*, thousands of *talmidim* passed through Rav Shimon’s deft hands. But there was no such thing as “just another *talmid*.” Each one was an *olam malei*. Each was treated as an individual and granted a unique place in Rav Shimon’s boundless heart. At the *levayah*, so many *talmidim* shed tears, brokenhearted at the loss of their venerated and beloved Rosh Yeshiva. Each *talmid* felt such a connection that he was certain *he* had been closest to Rav Shimon. But, in fact, Rav Shimon had the uncanny ability to connect to so many, yet to regard each one as a *ben yachid*.

Rav Shimon possessed a distinct blend of *shtoltz* and *varmkeit*. He was warm and caring. When you would speak to him, he would fondly hold on to your arm as he lent you

a most attentive ear. Yet at the very same time, he was Rav Shimon Alster, a *gadol baTorah* and *yiras Shamayim*. He was a great *talmid chacham* and *lamdan*, a prize *talmid* of Rav Binyomin Paler, who excelled at both *lomdus* and *asukei shmaita aliba d’hilchasa*. A *talmid* shared that throughout his years in Kollel, he would speak in learning with his Rebbi on a weekly basis on any topic that he was learning, and especially in *Shulchan Aruch*. He had a *hadras panim*, an aura of splendor that permeated the atmosphere around him. He connected to you more like a brother than a father, but he wouldn’t lower himself. Instead he lifted you up along with him. When speaking to a *bachur* about his challenges, he would empathize with him, acknowledging that he himself had gone through the very same struggles, but then he expected the *bachur* to follow in his path — to build himself up, to seek *gadlus*.

He believed in his *talmidim*, often a lot more than they believed in themselves, and he built them up until they believed as well. He arose early to deliver an early morning *shiur* in his shul in Flatbush, where he inspired and guided young *baalei batim*, helping them develop into true *bnei Torah*. He would then travel to yeshiva for Shacharis, followed by a *halachah shiur* in which he incorporated the *lomdus* of the *sugyas* into a clear understanding of *halachah P’maseh*. The Rosh Yeshiva would spend the rest of the morning in the *bais medrash*, engaging the *bachurim* in learning, discussing the *sugya* with his characteristic *klohrkeit* and *zeeskeit*. Rav Shimon was in the *bais medrash* second *seder* and night *seder* as well. His very presence created an aura of *gadlus* and *romemus*. Ask any *talmid*; he will fondly recall the treasured moments standing at Rebbi’s *shtender*, soaking in the sublime experience. He might not remember the precise *chiddush*, but the experience left an indelible impression.



L-R: Rav Binyomin Paller, Rav Shimon, and his father-in-law Rav Yosef Weiss



With Rav Yerucham Olshin



With Rav Chaim Kanievsky



With Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman

Using your Seichel

*In a beautiful letter penned to a talmid, Rav Shimon eloquently explains that the greatest connection between people, is formed through *shituf hade'os*, the joining of minds. Rav Shimon explains that through a Rebbe imparting his wisdom and mindset to a talmid, they fuse together as one, and even more so when that intellectual interaction is with *divrei Torah*, which has a special power to bind.*

Rav Shimon was forever a thinker. Every aspect of life was approached and examined with *seichel*. He did not live by rote or act in a certain way just because everyone else did. This character trait was evident from when Rav Shimon was yet a child. As an infant, Rav Shimon was orphaned from his father, who perished in a tragic plane crash. He grew up with his mother as an only child, living on the 17th floor of an apartment complex on the West Side. At age twelve, he came to the conclusion that it wasn't proper to use the Shabbos elevator, so every Shabbos, he would walk up and down 17 flights of stairs each time he went out for *tefillos*. At the age of 14, Rav Shimon made the life-altering decision to travel to Eretz Yisrael to learn in Yeshivas Kol Torah. To his mother's everlasting credit, she allowed her *ben yachid* to go off to learn, leaving her alone. This was one more example of how, throughout his life, Rav Shimon made decisions not based

on norms, but following the exacting barometer of *emes* and *yashrus*.

As a *yungerman* learning in Rav Paler's Kollel, he was invited to Long Beach to be interviewed by the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock. The discussion lasted for hours and Rav Yitzchok was duly impressed. At the conclusion, Rav Feigelstock asked Rav Shimon if he was capable of delivering *shmuessen*, to which Rav Shimon responded that he could say *vaadim*. "And what will you say?" Rav Feigelstock asked. "I will explain how a Yid is different than a *goy!*" The Rosh Yeshiva was delighted with his response. For decades, Rav Shimon masterfully led the second seder in Long Beach, influencing scores of *talmidim* through his *shiurim* and *vaadim*.

Rav Shimon's entire life was one long *vaad*. Of course, there were the structured *vaadim* in *Nefesh Hachayim*, *Emunah Ubitachon* of the Chazon Ish, and other *musar sefarim*. He utilized these *vaadim* to give over the *mesoras haTorah* and *hashkafas haTorah* he had received from Rav Paler, himself a *talmid* of the Brisker Rav, thereby connecting his *talmidim* to the bygone *gadlus* of yesteryear. But his "*vaad*" was not limited to that. Every interaction was a lesson. He would take every opportunity to share insights from *gedolim* and recount stories, exposing his *talmidim* to *musagim* of *gadlus baTorah* and *yiras Shamayim*. He brought out the beauty and depth of Yiddishkeit. When returning from a family *simchah*, he



would discuss the meaning of a *chasunah*, of a bar mitzvah or a bris with his *talmidim*.

Teaching Talmidim How to Think

With Rav Shimon, there was no *narishkeiten*. *Gashmiyus* had no meaning; life revolved around Torah and *avodas Hashem*. So many issues born of *katnus* would simply melt away in his towering presence. He possessed a witty sense of humor, which he masterfully utilized to make *leitzanusa d'avodah zarah*, slicing straight through the fluff and uncovering the *emes*.

He would quip to a talmid, "You see a person walking a dog, but what do I see? The dog is in front. When the dog stops, the person stops. When the dog walks the person walks. It's the dog who is walking the person!"

Rav Shimon's *shiur* focused on *glattkeit* and *pshat*. He would read through the Gemara, analyzing the words, until the *sugya* would come alive from the Gemara itself. He then continued on to *Rishonim* and *Acharonim*, but everything led back to the Gemara. After the *shiur*, Rav Shimon's *breitkeit* in the *sugyos* would become clear, but that was not what he aimed to teach his *talmidim*. He wanted them to think. He encouraged them to think through questions, so that they could come to the *terutz* themselves — not by searching for the answer in a *sefer*. He would call a few *talmidim* to his *shtender* and discuss the *sugya* with them, demonstrating to them how, through logical and

rational thinking, they were capable of reaching absolute clarity.

A former talmid once asked a shailah regarding his wife fasting on Tishah B'Av. Rav Shimon insisted that the talmid learn through the inyan in the Mishnah Berurah first himself. After the talmid had done so, Rav Shimon asked him what he thinks the psak would be, to which the talmid responded that it seems she is required to fast. Rav Shimon responded that, indeed, the Mishnah Berurah sounds that way but we pasken like the Aruch Hashulchan, who is meikil. Rav Shimon's goal wasn't just to provide the psak. He wanted it to be a learning experience.

Committed to Every Talmid's Growth

Rav Shimon was always there for his *talmidim*. They spoke to him, unburdening their struggles and challenges, and he listened. He saw past the immediate issue and calculated the next step and the next.

A group of talmidim was returning from Eretz Yisrael and, naturally, they planned to enroll in Bais Medrash Govoha. Knowing this specific group, Rav Shimon felt they would gain from returning to Cliffwood. But what would be with shidduchim? they countered. "Do you think it's the shadchanim who make matches?" he replied. "It's the Ribono Shel Olam! You won't lose out from learning where you will learn best." Indeed these bachurim stayed in Cliffwood and they all got engaged within the next few months.

A talmid, R' Yaakov Tesser, became a Rav in the nearby Young

Israel of Aberdeen. The ciruv needed to be refurbished and the neighboring Conservative Rabbi offered to donate towards the cause. As usual, R' Yaakov Tesser turned to Rav Shimon for guidance. "You can take the money, but only if you promise that you will never make a joint event with them." Rav Shimon's foresight was incredible. Just a few months later, R' Yaakov was invited to speak in the Conservative synagogue and host a joint celebration. It was only due to that promise that he was able to hold strong and keep his distance, even after taking the money.

When it came to his *talmidim*, Rav Shimon took full *achrayus*. He made himself available as much as possible, and if he couldn't answer the phone, he would call them back. He always remembered their last conversation, and remained fully aware of where each *talmid* was holding. Indeed, at a recent parlor meeting, he told his *talmidim* that he felt he was in the middle of a conversation with each of them, and the conversation must continue!

A *talmid* was offered a *shtetler* in an out-of-town community and he called Rav Shimon for guidance. Rav Shimon responded that he had to look into it. After checking into the matter Rav Shimon responded, "For you it's a great opportunity, but I don't think it will work out well for your youngest son!"

In a beautifully penned letter that Rav Shimon sent to the mother of a *talmid* who wanted her son to attend college, Rav Shimon explained that the greatest *nachas* a parent can have is to see their child be successful. He described how this *talmid* is already "the talk of the town" (he knew precisely what words to use to touch the mother's heart). He wrote (quite uncharacteristically) that he *guarantees* that this *talmid*

will continue to be successful in his learning and become a tremendous source of *nachas* to his parents and his *rabbeim*. "If you pluck flowers and place them on the table, the enjoyment will be great, but fleeting. But if you leave them to grow in the garden, the enjoyment will be indefinite. The same applies to the growth of *talmidim*," Rav Shimon eloquently explained. Growth is not instantaneous. It takes time and needs to be nurtured and developed.

This was Rav Shimon's approach to *chinuch*. His goal was not to impress *talmidim* with dazzling *shiurim* or impressive *chiddushim*. His goal was to help them develop at their own pace, to stand by them and nurture them, to guide and assist them in their own steady growth. Rav Shimon was the "*malach ha'omeid aleihem v'omer lahem 'Gedal'*."

Rav Shimon had the uncanny ability to relate to anybody and everybody, and he utilized this capability to the fullest. Somehow, Rav Shimon managed to serve both as a Rosh Yeshiva and a Rav. He was once asked how he managed to juggle both responsibilities, to which he responded, a juggler lets go of one ball; I never let go of any..."

Rav Shimon connected to the biggest *metzuyan*, to the weakest *talmid*, to the *baalei batim* in his shul, and to so many others, even those beyond his immediate responsibility.

At the *shivah*, the family received a phone call from Rabbi Silverberg. He related that he had never met the Rosh Yeshiva, but after their son was tragically shot and killed in Yeshiva in a drive-by shooting, they had received a letter from Rav Shimon. Rav Shimon, who had no prior connection to the family, wrote that since he had been killed in yeshiva, it is a loss for all *inei yeshivos* and he is writing to express his *hishtatfus* in their pain. Rabbi Silverberg said that this thoughtful and heartfelt letter was such a tremendous *nechamah* for the family and gives them *chizuk* still today.

Rav Shimon's passing leaves generations of *talmidim*, as well as his treasured *inei kehillah*, orphaned. Rav Shimon had carried them under his wing. They had been so close, so connected, and now he is gone. But Rav Shimon's message to his *talmidim* still resonates.

"Ashrei *chelki*," writes Rav Shimon in closing to a *talmid*, "That I merited to be *mekasher nefesh b'nefesh* to a *yakar* like you, and with all my heart I *bentch* you with *hatzlachah b'chol d'rachechah*..."

Rebbi cherished his relationship with us.

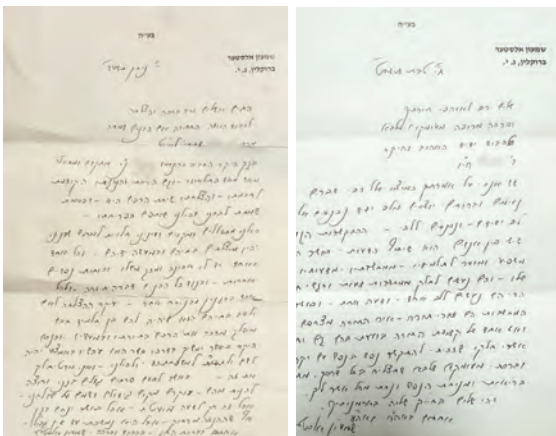
Rebbi believed in us.

We can all succeed.

We can all *shteig*.

We can all attain *gadlus*.

Yehi zichro baruch. 🕉



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