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# HoRAV SHIMON ALSTER זצ"ל

שר וגדול  
נפל בישראל

## Zichronos of My Rebbe: A Personal Tribute to HoRav Shimon Alster zt"l

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*Sitting down to write these words seems somewhat surreal. The idea that we would be standing here today without the Rosh Yeshiva is not something we anticipated. Yes, we knew that over the past few months the Rosh Yeshiva hadn't been feeling well. Yes, we each noted with concern the Rosh Yeshiva's weakened state, but we saw as well his continued efforts. The Rosh Yeshiva pushed himself to say yet another shiur in yeshiva, to speak to yet another talmid - and we were convinced it was a passing phase. The Rosh Yeshiva was not "old". The doctors would figure out the root cause of the issue, and all would be well. But Hakadosh Baruch Hu declared otherwise - and we, his talmidim, share a feeling of unpreparedness, of loss, of not knowing where to turn with the myriad questions we were each discussing with the Rosh Yeshiva just a few weeks ago.*

*In the coming to terms with this loss, it is most difficult to pen any sort of satisfactory words of hesped, or even any sort of biographical sketch that would do any bit of justice to the Rosh Yeshiva, and certainly not in so short a time frame. As such, the following should in no way be construed as a thought-out and developed piece, but merely as the initial thoughts and reactions in attempting to process and come to terms with the loss, tremendously personal, of a giant of a leader who molded the lives of myself and hundreds, if not thousands, of talmidim.*

The Rosh Yeshiva, HaRav Shimon Alster, was a brilliant diamond, a Gadol illuminating our generation. He impacted multitudes of talmidim and their families, with ripples carried on to their own talmidim and communities. His shiurim, his vaadim, and his "discussions around the shtender" would mold talmidim in their way of learning and their entire way of thinking, constantly raising them to an ever higher caliber.

If one were to peer into the Rosh Yeshiva's life as a child, it would be near impossible to foresee what this young child would rise to become. The Rosh Yeshiva's parents were married in 1936, and remained childless for many years. It would be nearly a decade until they were blessed with the birth of their first, and only, child. Shortly after the Rosh Yeshiva's birth, tragedy struck. On the return flight from a trip to Belgium in September 1946, the Rosh Yeshiva's father would be a victim of the world's first commercial air disaster, a Sabena flight that crashed into remote woods near Gander, a village on the eastern tip of Canada. The Rosh Yeshiva would spend his formative years alone with his mother, bereft of the guidance of a father, without the camaraderie of siblings. And yet - it was this child who never had a father who would become a father to so many. It was this child who had far from a typical upbringing who would be a master of chinuch, guiding not only the growth of his talmidim, but the growth of his talmidim's children as well. And it was this child who grew up alone who would have a remarkable talent in connecting to, and being able to convey true understanding, of people of all walks of life.

To begin at such a daunting starting point and to rise to become a Gadol B'Yisroel is beyond remarkable. And yet - to peer a little deeper into the Rosh Yeshiva's story is to make it all the more breathtaking. The Rosh Yeshiva spent his early years on Manhattan's Upper West Side, attending a local day school. With a degree of affluence at home, with no specific Torah-intensive emphasis in his schooling, a child in this setting would rightly be predicted to become a successful



businessman, perhaps continuing the families business in the diamond industry, the picture one of a polished Jew mingling among well-heeled circles. The Rosh Yeshiva, however, took a dramatically different turn. At the age of 14, he set out for Eretz Yisroel, to learn in Yeshivas Kol Torah under the guidance of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and other Torah luminaries. He would spend three uninterrupted years there, immersed in true Torah study. The decision boggles the mind. To leave his mother for a foreign, distant land. To leave an American schooling for an entirely new culture. To leave a home where he lacked nothing for a land that had no physical pleasures, or basics, to speak of. It was here that the trajectory of greatness became apparent, producing a young man who would return to American shores to learn under the tutelage of Rav Binyomin Paler zt"l, rising to become a luminary and beacon for a generation of aspiring American talmidim.

The Rosh Yeshiva's life would encompass decades of devoted chinuch, reaching talmidim in multiple capacities.

For decades, the Rosh Yeshiva served as the Second Seder Maggid Shiur in the Mesifita of Long Beach. Not limited to the second seder limud alone, the Rosh Yeshiva would deliver vaadim in Nefesh HaChaim, Parshas Hashavua and Mesilas Yesharim. In the summer months, the Rosh Yeshiva would accompany the yeshiva to Camp Horim, serving as the "acting Rosh Yeshiva", a setting that opened up new opportunities to bond with talmidim. Eventually, a nucleus of Long Beach talmidim would convince the Rosh Yeshiva to move from Boro Park to Flatbush and serve as their Rav. This new shul would blossom and flourish, providing many talmidim with a home for continued growth in the decades after leaving yeshiva, a beautiful environment of Torah and Aliyah for them and their families. Eventually, the Rosh Yeshiva would leave Long Beach and open his own Yeshiva in Cliffwood, impacting hundreds of additional talmidim. To the Long Beach talmidim, it was "Rebbi". To the Shul members, it was "the Rav". To Cliffwood talmidim, it was "the Rosh Yeshiva". To all, there was a father, a giant who knew you, understood you, and constantly showed you how to grow, to move out of "your box", to challenge yourself to be a true Ben Torah and Eved Hashem.

Pick up a diamond and hold it to the sunlight. An array of colors burst forth. Depending on the line of vision, entirely different colors will brilliantly shine forth. Each observer, depending on his unique angle, might experience an entirely different color or hue - but all will marvel at the brilliance of the diamond. The Rosh Yeshiva had a remarkable ability to appeal to an extremely varied audience. Whether dealing with a very yeshivishe individual or one who was modern orthodox, whether dealing with a well developed lamdan or a more simple minded individual, whether discussing a concept with a middle aged businessman or an elementary child in cheder, the Rosh Yeshiva was able to connect with each one, addressing them in a way that made it clear that he fully understood the person. He understood you. He "got" you. And when he spoke to you, you listened, because it resonated in a way that spoke directly to you. There were times one message, there was one call of the Rosh Yeshiva, to use very situation and life to grow in Torah and Avodas Hashem, but it shone forth in a way that each person could experience it from his own vantage point, with each talmid feeling he had attained a unique relationship and understanding with the Rosh Yeshiva.

Although the Rosh Yeshiva's pool of talmidim grew to encompass quite large numbers, he avoided any semblance of prestige or honor. He was extremely goal oriented, and cared only to accomplish what had to be done, and teach what had to be taught. Being accorded honor was something which had no value at all in his system.

The Rosh Yeshiva developed warm connections with many people over the years, talmidim and beyond. A number

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1. I recall the Rosh Yeshiva speaking of one of those moments where the disparities of the way of life in Eretz Yisroel and the USA "hit him" - at a meal with a number of bachurim, the Rosh Yeshiva noticed there were only a handful of knives put out, far less than the number of boys around the table. Turning to a local boy from Yerushalayim sitting next to him, he commented that "At least they could put out more knives". The boy looked at him quizzically and responded "What for? In my home we have only two knives, one for milchigs and one for fleishigs".



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of these are individuals "of means", "with connections" or "in the right places". Any of these would gladly have rushed to have the Rosh Yeshiva placed as the keynote speaker at a convention, feature guest at a high-profile shabbos, or headlining an event. And yet, the Rosh Yeshiva rarely made any visible appearance in those settings - the honorifics had no place on his radar, and he did not see these venues as the place where he could have a true impact.

When I authored a work on the Ani Maamins about three years ago, I asked the Rosh Yeshiva for a letter of *haskama*. Between the back-and-forth, the submission deadline rapidly approached. The Rosh Yeshiva told me he would be happy to write it that night, but he was in the Catskills, and his stationery was in Yeshiva in Cliffwood. I offered to quickly create a letterhead, to which the Rosh Yeshiva acquiesced. He insisted, however, that I follow strict instructions. No mention of Yeshiva. No mention of the shul. No title. I was baffled. What then? "Just write Shimon Alster - Brooklyn, NY". I tried reasoning that many esteemed Gedolim over the generations used at least basic titles. There was no room to budge.

With the Shul motivated to grow, and the Rosh Yeshiva having overwhelming time constraints, there was some recent discussion of bringing in a *maggid shiur* to the shul to offer *shiurim* throughout the week. Some of the *baalebatim* expressed concern that it might lead to trouble, if a fresh and potentially successful *maggid shiur* might be "stepping on the Rav's toes". The response? "No problem. If that happens, I'll retire. If he's the one bringing energy and raising the Torah level in the shul, he should lead you". The only factor was *Avodas Hashem*, there simply was no other calculation.

"Chaza"l tell us that *Osniel Ben Kenaz* was so called because "Yoatz viRibetz yeshivos biYisrael" - he excelled in advising and growing yeshivos for Klal Yisrael. Shouldn't the order be reversed? First he grew the Yeshivos, then he advised the talmidim... The intent here, apparently, is not for advising talmidim. He advised the nation of Klal Yisrael. He saw what they needed - and then he grew yeshivos to meet the needs of the generation. He understood what exactly was necessary, and built yeshivos structured to address the need. [Hesped in Lakewood for HaRav Yitzchok Feigelstock Zt"l].

The Rosh Yeshiva was a master at understanding the times, and understanding each talmid. Firmly entrenched in the schools of the Chazon Ish and the Brisker Rav, he appealed to and was eminently effective not only in the chinchuk of the more yeshivish talmidim, but just as well with those of a more Americanized upbringing. He focused on who his talmidim were, and how best to reach them, and delivered his *shiurim* and *vaadim* based on this understanding. It was the exact same message - delivered in precisely the proper techniques.

The Rosh Yeshiva abhorred "dictating from the pulpit". Everything was a guided discussion. Be it a difficult *sugya*, or discussing matters of *Haskafa*, he would ask, answer, challenge, and discuss until we brought ourselves to his conclusion. Likely molded after the Brisker Rav's informally

"learning around the table" with talmidim, his preferred method during Seder was always to call up groups of four or five *bachurim* and work through the *sugya*. He knew exactly where he was headed but was getting each individual to come to that conclusion on his own. Even his speeches in Shul, or at an alumni event, were always delivered in "discussion style". As his son R' Eli pointed out at the *levaya*, his very posture lent to this style. Rather than standing rigidly, he would lean far over with his *shtender*, as if to lean into the crowd, and have them join with him.

When visiting my in-laws in Flatbush, I would walk over to the Rosh Yeshiva's shul for Friday night *Maariv*, as well as for *Shalosh Seudos*, to hear the Rosh Yeshiva speak. After a number of occasions visiting the shul, it struck me that the Rosh Yeshiva's *shmuessen* in the shul differed subtly in style and in content from that which he said in Yeshiva, with the Rosh Yeshiva often using other *seforim* as the primary sources. In truth, the Rosh Yeshiva had a vast array at his disposal - what was said was a matter of selection, understanding that the audience needed to hear and how best to deliver the message. As the audience in yeshiva and in the shul were of different stages and settings in life, a different approach was necessary.

When writing the aforementioned work on Ani Maamin, I had the privilege of having the Rosh Yeshiva discuss, or read over, much of the work. There was one particular chapter which grappled with a somewhat complex issue and I asked the Rosh Yeshiva whether to include it. After about a week of not hearing back, I queried the Rosh Yeshiva again. He responded that he had in fact read the questionable chapter. Twice. The problem, he said, was understanding whether the average not-particularly-well-versed reader would come away enlightened or confused. "To judge this, I have to put myself into that mentality, and really try to judge from that perspective. I tried twice, but I'm not convinced I had the right mentality down pat when reading it. I'm going to have to try again".

The Rosh Yeshiva challenged us with each discussion, whatever the topic. He would encourage us to laugh at ourselves, and laugh at the world, pointing out the futility and pettiness of so many things we tend to do when going through life without real thought or measurement of value. Every incident in life was a lesson. Everything was on the table. Yes, he would note, we all consider ourselves in control of our desires - but how do you feel when you walk into a wedding just as they cart the food away from the *smorgasbord*? All of a sudden you're starving, desperate! And to think a moment earlier you didn't even realize you were hungry!

The Rosh Yeshiva asked "There's this accepted concept that everyone in a picture has to smile, no matter the situation. That's what we do. What do you think the Chazon Ish looked like in pictures?" Most responded that he probably looked serious. The Rosh Yeshiva smiled and chastised us "You're projecting your own weaknesses onto our gedolim! You smile because you want to create a false image that you were having a great time. You plug your "put on a facade" mentality into the Chazon Ish and assume he would want to give off a

serious impression. The Chazon Ish was a man of Emes! He looked in the picture exactly the way he was feeling."

The Rosh Yeshiva used every bit of life all around us as a lesson, either what to be or what not to be.

The *bachurim* in Long Beach returned from a night of collecting for IPF, an organization for the poor in Eretz Yisroel, just before Purim. These ventures exposed the *bachurim* to neighborhoods all across Brooklyn, Westchester and Long Island and beyond. Many experiences were positive, others definitely less so. The Rosh Yeshiva heard us talking and said: "That individual who opened his door with a snide remark - The one who made it clear that his "important financial standing" afforded him the right to let loose with a litany of his opinions on everything about Yeshivos, poverty, Eretz Yisroel and everything else - he used to also be your age. When do you think he developed into the person he was? So ask yourself, on some minuscule level, when you see a person come around collecting in Yeshiva and you debate whether to give him a dollar or a quarter, are you nurturing those same "Let him get a job and not bother me" feelings? Are you guilty of those same middos?"

And the Rosh Yeshiva was able to seamlessly blend the Torah of Brisk with infusions of so many others, drawing from Rav Tzaddok Hakohen and Rav Hirsch.

Somebody mentioned that Rav Hirsch famously remarked that he would like to see the Alps before he dies, as Hakadosh Baruch Hu will surely ask "Did you see my beautiful Alps I made for you? The Rosh Yeshiva replied that he definitely agreed with that sentiment, but hadn't managed to take the trip, because he was rather preoccupied with the one question right before that one "Did you see my beautiful Tsofaos?".

"U'bocharta BaChayim Limaan Tichyeh Atoh ViZarecha - choose life, so that you and your children will live" - What is the purpose of this mitzva? By this point, we've already been told nearly the entire Torah. We were already commanded to keep Shabbos, keep kosher, not charge *Ribbis* etc. For the one who "got it", and is abiding by those mitzvos, a further instruction to choose life is unnecessary. For the one who has ignored everything until now, what will another mitzva help? It must be the Torah is talking to one who already keeps everything - but he still has a choice. You can do it because "you have to", or you can do it because "you want to". It's the same action, but the attitude is up to you. You can be a "Naaseh ViNishma" Jew, or a "Kofoh Alayhem Har KiGigis" Jew. The ultimate difference? *Lemaan tichyeh atoh vizarecha* - to really experience life. Do it because you're forced and you'll be miserable. Do it because you understand it, value it, and want it, and you'll really experience living. U'bocharta BaChayim - Choose to be a chooser. [Shmuess in Yeshiva]

It was this thought of his that struck me as one that truly defined his approach. Be real. Understand what you're doing. He would ask us to explain, in our terms, different concepts, and when we were done he would often respond "Now say it again with your eyes open". Understand what it means to be a Yid, and what it means to be a Ben Torah. Understand the

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massive significance of Limmud HaTorah. Don't just consign yourself to being part of a system. Stand proud of who you are, and what you do and stand for. You don't have to act different - you can be doing the same limmud hatorah, and the same mitzvos, as everyone "in the system" - but you're not doing it because you're going with the flow, you're doing it because it's the avenue that's correct, because you want it, see the value in it, and truly believe in it.

"Picture a kid in camp trying out his new flashlight. He notes that it can cast a beam a good twenty five feet away. Another kid nearby notices and rushes to point out that his flashlight is much stronger. Pridefully, he shows off a beam stretching a good fifty feet... This kid's got it. But suppose for a moment these two kids would stand on the Verrazano bridge, under those massive lamps. Any talk of "My flashlight is stronger" would somehow seem rather petty. A bachur might feel pride comparing his Torah knowledge to other bochurim who might be weaker, but if he had any idea what Torah scholarship looked like in earlier generations, and certainly in the times of Rishonim, it would seem pretty foolish... And the Rishonim's knowledge compared to the awesomeness of what Torah truly encompasses? Picture the lights on the Verrazano shining... during daytime". [Vaad in Yeshiva]

The Rosh Yeshiva, in opening the eyes of talmidim to what life is truly all about, would simultaneously make us feel exceedingly big and yet exceedingly small. Big, because we are part of something monumental. We are VIP'S, members of the

Am HaNivchar, children of Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov. Small, because any honest assessment forces us to realize just how small we are next to the giants of earlier generations.

As a bachur I once approached the Rosh Yeshiva excitedly pointing out that the Chasam Sofer wrote that something had no source in Shas - and yet I had located an apparent source. The Rosh Yeshiva stopped me in my tracks and said "Go do teshuva and then come back and ask again". Seeing my puzzlement, he explained "You're welcome to ask a question - but if you have any inkling of where you stand vis-a-vis the Chasam Sofer there would be no way you'd come over with a "Gotcha!" approach that you "caught him". Come back the right way. I see the Chasam Sofer and I don't understand. There's a question. Then we'll try to figure it out."

I once expressed my puzzlement over a gemara in Megillah that seemed to portray an Amora in a very negative light. The Rosh Yeshiva asked "So what are you trying to say?" I replied that I had nothing in mind at all. The Rosh Yeshiva replied "The words of Gemara are Kodesh Kodoshim. The purpose of our Torah is to teach us lessons. If you're using your question to bring out a lesson - I'm all ears. But if you just want to point out a negative fact - there's nothing for us to discuss".

Time is short. The print deadline is approaching in minutes, there's so much more to cover, so much more to say, and there's not much that can do any justice to the greatness of the Rosh Yeshiva. There's a feeling of overwhelming paucity - of having barely touched the basics...

One final point:

Sometimes we see a gemara, have a question, and see the Rishonim offering a solution that seems to us rather strained. Why couldn't they say our solution, one that seems so much better? Picture yourself in a pitch black room. Trying to find the door. Gropping here and there, stumbling. Suddenly a voice tells you that the door is over to your right. You reach over, but feel only a small opening, a tight space. No way this is the door. Over to your left you suddenly feel a broad opening. Ah! That's it! Now picture the lights going on. Turns out that narrow space was in fact the door. Your open space was the open door plunging down an elevator shaft... We are groping in the dark. We judge the best we can - but the Rishonim had the lights on". [Discussion with bachurim].

I would add one point - a blind man is allowed to make a blessing of Pokayach Ivrim each morning, because he is indeed a beneficiary of the blessing of sight. After all, others, who can see, can guide him.

We may have been groping in the dark, but for all these years we had a Rebbi with the power of vision, who we could turn to and ask how things truly appear. We've lost that illumination, and are left stumbling, not knowing where to go with our questions.

But as talmidim, we can surely feel Reb Shimon taking us by the arm, with his trademark "tug-on-the-sleeve", and saying "Come Rabbosai, let's go".

May we live our lives in a way that will meet his expectations from us.

Yehi Zichro Baruch.

### RAV SHIMON ALSTER, ZT"l

RABBI MOSHE SCHOCHET

If you ever heard the expression "Ligin in Learning" that was my impression of Rav Shimon Alster! I learned in Mesivta of Long Beach, and that 'mahus' of Rav Shimon 'trachting' in learning 24/7 made a 'roysham' on me as a simple 9th Grade Freshman. Rav Chaim Brisker zt"l told his children that they always need to be *ligin* in learning, even if they have to interrupt to help someone, but right back to *steiting* in Torah. I used to get rides with Rav Shimon from Long Beach back home to Boro Park or Flatbush. I had my heart in my mouth as Rav Shimon was thinking in learning, and I was watching the roads. I was afraid that he would take his hands off the steering wheel to use his hand motions, while he's *klering* in a *sugya*. B"h, I always arrived to Brooklyn or back to Mesivta of Long Beach safely. "Ein Shmira KaTorah!

Yehi Zichro Baruch!

### HARAV SHIMON ALSTER, ZT"l

YECHIEL MECHEL SOCHET

When I was a 17 year old *bochur* learning in Long Beach Yeshiva, if we needed to go home for the night to Brooklyn, Rav Shimon, the head of the second *sefer* program would give us a ride. Once he spent the entire trip discussing the silliness of being so involved as a baseball fan. In my mind I saw no chance of him succeeding with this message. When I was in my mid fifties I met him at a dinner and told him I noticed that I am no longer a fan. I said that at the end of Ki Savo, Rashi says, "ein adam omeid al sof daito shel Rabbo vechachmas mishnaso ad arbaim shana - a man cannot truly understand the full understanding of his rebbi and wisdom of his teachings until forty years!" He had a big smile. When I spoke at a *bar mitzva* I related this story. My message to the boy was "you are hearing a lot of *divrei chizuk*, much is not penetrating, but listen anyway because you never know years from now how much you truly did hear."

Yehi zichro baruch