

Photo credit: AEGedolimphotos.com



# ORPHANED OF A FATHERLY FIGURE

TRIBUTE TO RAV SHIMON ALSTER ZT"L  
ROSH YESHIVAS YESHIVAH GEDOLAH OF CLIFFWOOD

---

R' YECHESKEL OSTREICHER



*What roles does a father play? Which characteristics quantify the essence of a father?*

*A father is primarily a teacher. He is a role model. He teaches his child the fundamentals that carry them throughout life. He is a guiding light, a source of wise counsel, a propelling force for his child to reach their fullest potential.*

*A father commands respect while showering his children with boundless love.*

*A father shares his child's successes and struggles as if they are his own; each milestone is celebrated by father and child equally.*

*A father cares about each child's issues, big and small, and will not rest until they are all resolved. Time constraints do not exist; distractions fall away when a devoted father tends to his child.*

*A father understands each child's individual needs, and does not lose focus of one child because of another one.*

*A loving father carries each child in his heart. And each child feels that love acutely.*

Rav Shimon Alster *zt"l* held many positions throughout his rich life. He was a prominent member of the *hanhalah* of Long Beach yeshivah for over three decades before opening a yeshivah

of his own in Cliffwood, NJ. He was a loyal shepherd to his *kehillah* in Flatbush for close to 30 years. There are many ways to describe a *rav* or a *rosh yeshivah*. But the overwhelming sentiment upon R' Shimon's untimely *petirah* was the orphaned feeling of the loss of a father; he personified the attributes of a father to the hundreds within his sphere of influence.

Incredibly, R' Shimon never experienced a father of his own. His father passed away in a tragic accident when he was but a few months old, leaving behind the widow, Mrs. Gittel Alster, to care for her only child. It was a lonely and difficult childhood, to say the least. But young Shimon persevered, finding his solace—just as Dovid Hamelch did—in the words of Torah.

When it came time to enter high school, he informed his mother of his desire to go learn in Eretz Yisrael. With tears in her eyes, Mrs. Alster sent her 14-year-old son off. She pined for him greatly, often crying herself to sleep, but she knew, even though none of her friends could understand, that this was the greatest gift she could give her son.

It wouldn't take long for her to see *nachas*.

In Eretz Yisrael, while learning in Yeshivas Kol Torah, R' Shimon discovered the world of Torah greatness, becoming close to and learning about many *gedolim* of the Torah world. Later, he returned to America and learned under the tu-

HE WOULD GO AROUND FROM ONE *BACHUR* TO THE NEXT, ASKING, PROBING, LISTENING, AND DIRECTING UNTIL HE FELT THEY ALL HAD IT CLEAR

telage of Rav Binyomen Paler, who saw his great potential and became his *rebbe muvhak*.

Shortly after his marriage to Esther *a"n*, daughter of Rav Avrohom Yosef Weiss, *rosh yeshivas* Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan, he was approached by Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock, *rosh yeshivas* Long Beach, as the yeshivah was looking for someone to lead second *seder*. The conversation lasting three hours, after which the *rosh yeshivah* exclaimed, "Rav Aharon *volt hana'ah gehat fun dir*—Rav Aharon [Kotler] would have had pleasure from you!"

## TEACHING TOGETHER

Thus began a lifetime of *harbatzas Torah*. His style was unique; engaging and clear. R' Shimon once said of himself, "I don't give speeches, I learn together." That was true both in yeshivah and later, when he founded K'hal Torah U'Tefillah, a shul where *Torah'dig ba'alei batim*, many of them former *talmidim* of his, were elevated by not only by his actions and his words, but his very presence.

In yeshivah, he would call over two or three *chavrusahs* and start learning the Gemara. He would go around from one *bachur* to the next, asking, probing, listening, and directing until he felt they all had it clear. Then they would learn *Rashi* and *Tosafos*, then the *Rishonim*, all of them equally engaged, taken in by their *rebbe's* soft dynamism.

In general, his speeches were more like a conversation than a speech. He once said at an alumni *melaveh malkah*, "I am not speaking to the *tzibbur*, but to each of you individually."

While learning with the *ba'alei batim* as well, he felt that to teach did not mean to preach. He would sit at the head of table, as part of them, and ask everyone at the table for his opinion, leaning in to hear what this *misplalel* said and then the next one. He loved to hear everyone's nuances and personal input.

"You're a *Yekke*, so your *minhag* is like this," he would say during the Halachah shiur, pointing to one

*misplalel*. "You come from *chassidim*, so you it this way. And you," he'd continue, looking at a third, "you probably do like the *minhag hayeshivos*, because that's how you were brought up."

He was a phenomenal *talmid chacham* and an exceptional *lamdan*, but he was not one to flaunt his prowess. What he desired most was to show his *talmidim* the beauty of understanding Torah with clarity.

## A REBBI FOR LIFE

He viewed his role of *rebbe* as not only teaching Torah, but teaching *hashkafas haTorah* as well. The concepts he taught were as relevant for a *bachur* as for a middle-aged man, and they lasted a lifetime.

He taught his *bachurim* how to view current events, how to learn the lessons of the *parshah*, and how to feel the pain of another Yid, especially those living in Eretz Yisrael. He urged the *bachurim* to write letters to the parents of fallen soldiers to tell them that they are learning Mishnayos *v'zecher nishmas* their beloved sons.

More than anything, his *talmidim* learned from his actions. When Rav El-yashiv was *niftar*, R' Shimon sat down on the floor, and all the *bachurim* followed suit.

He hardly gave *mussar*, elevating the *bachurim* by showing them the meaning and depth of the life of a *ben Torah*. "The Gemara says that all *leitzaanus* is *assur* other than *leitzaanus* of *avodah zarah*," he would say, "And everything other than a *yeshivah bachur* at his Gemara is *avodah zarah*!"

At his initial meeting with Rav Feigelstock, R' Shimon said that besides giving *chaburos*, he was also capable of giving *va'adim*. When asked

what he would say, he replied, "A *Yid iz andersh*—A Yid is different."

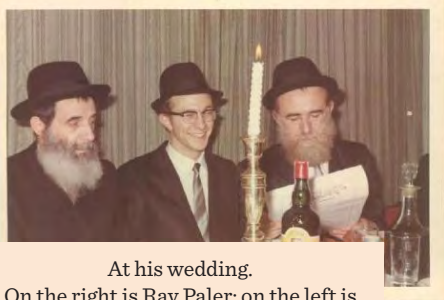
He was a *talmid* not only of his *rebbe'im*, but also of *gedolim* whom he didn't know personally. He would quote entire letters from *Igros Chazon Ish*. When he received the *sefer Kreina D'Igrasa*, a compilation of letters from the Steipler Gaon, for the first time, he couldn't put it down.

He knew the history of the *gedolim*, and he incorporated the lessons of their lives into his own. He maintained impeccable *middos tovos*, something he said he gleaned from reading about Rav Isser Zalman. The way he united his beautiful family of *talmidei chachamim* with the esteemed Leeder family of his second wife, Rebbetzin Leah Alstar, was a lesson in interpersonal relationships and *kavod ishto*.

HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS TALMIDIM WAS A UNIQUE BLEND OF LOVE AND AWE. HE DIDN'T NEED TO DEMAND RESPECT; THE TALMIDIM WERE IN AWE OF HIS HANHAGAS HACHAIM

As someone who lived through much hardship, he was able to relate to others' struggles. He was extremely thought-out and would deliberate each issue as if it was his own. He never did anything before contemplating what the purpose of it was and what the outcome would be.

His dedication was above and beyond. He was extremely accessible, calling back if he missed a call. And he would invest all the time necessary to solve whatever issue a *talmid* might be facing. Often, when asked about a *shidduch* or a school choice, R' Shimon would even do his own research before giving an answer.



At his wedding. On the right is Rav Paler; on the left is his father-in-law, Rabbi Weiss.





But always, the answer would be given through a prism of Torah *hash-kafah*.

*How would Rav Shach deal with such an issue? What would the Chazon Ish say?*

A *talmid*, a rabbi in an out-of-town Young Israel shul, asked him if he was allowed to take money for the local *eiruv* from the female rabbi of a Conservative synagogue.

"You can," R' Shimon replied after a moment. "But only on the condition that you promise never to join them for any event."

A few weeks after he took the money, the president of the synagogue reached out to him to know if they could host a joint Chol Hamo'ed celebration. It was then that rabbi realized the extent of his *rebbe's* wisdom.

## CONNECTIONS OF THE HEART

His relationship with his *talmidim* was a unique blend of love and awe. He didn't need to demand respect; the *talmidim* were in awe of his *hanhagas hachaim*. They saw his *hasmadah*, his love for Torah, the way he was in *beis midrash* until 12, only to awake at four thirty the next morning. They witnessed his careful *dikduk b'mitzvos*, matched only by his *chavivus hamitzvos*. And they saw

the *romemus* that *limud haTorah* produces.

They wanted to be like him, and they thirsted for his approval. R' Shimon rarely had to give a *schmuess* about negative behavior. A simple sign on the wall asking the *bachurim* to refrain from it would produce the desired results.

Speaking to him, you felt the love pouring forth. There was a tangible connection. And everyone felt like an only child.

At the yearly *melaveh malkah*, he would greet each *talmid* and comment on his personal life. "How is your *bachur* doing?" "How's the new job?" "Whatever happened with that idea we spoke about?"

He had an inimitable ability to connect to people of all ages and backgrounds, drawing them near and inspiring them.

At a *misplatte's* wedding that took place the week of *Parshas Beshalach*, a *yungerman* came over with his four-year-old son, to say *shalom aleichem*.

R' Shimon took the young boy's hand and proceeded to describe the events before *Krias Yam Suf*. "The *Mitzriyim* were right behind them, and they were stuck in front of the water, and suddenly, Hashem made a *neis* and the water split, allowing *Enei Yisrael* to just walk in!"

"Wow!" the boy exclaimed, his face lighting up.

A few weeks later, the *yungerman* met R' Shimon, who said, "I still think about your son's 'wow!' Why don't we get so impressed from thinking about Hashem's *nissim*?"

Members of the shul recall the speech before

A FEW WEEKS LATER, THE *YUNGERMAN* MET R' SHIMON, WHO SAID, "I STILL THINK ABOUT YOUR SON'S 'WOW!' WHY DON'T WE GET SO IMPRESSED FROM THINKING ABOUT HASHEM'S *NISSIM*?"

*Mussaf* each Shabbos. It was never a *vertel* on the *parshah*; it was a fundamental *yesod*, based on a *Meshech Chochmah*, a *Chasam Sofer*, or a *Malbim*. He would bring the listeners into the concept rather than giving the concept to the listeners. And the way he would conclude, with a warm *mazel tov* to each family that was making a *simchah*, evoked the warmth of a loving *zeide bentching* his cherished grandchildren.

Indeed, he saw his shul as family, and he'd sit together with his *misपाल-elim* at *simchos*, reveling in their joys.

"How do you manage to juggle the shul and the *yeshivah*?" he was once asked.

"A juggler has to throw up one ball to catch the other. I don't juggle. I never leave go of either one," he said.

His mind was always on his *talmidim*, his *misपालelim*. He elevated them and he taught them. He cared for them and he guided them. He loved them, and they revered him in return.

And he took pride in them, like a father in his child. ●

