

BY YECHESKEL OSTREICHER

There was a ladder placed toward the ground, its head reaching the skies.

There is a reason the greatest people of our nation are often compared to the enigmatic ladder in Yaakov's dream: *ulam mut-zav artzah v'rosho magia haShomaymah*. The phrase has long become standard in describing people of great stature.

There is a reason for it.

This fusion of heaven and earth, of G-dliness and the mundane, represents the ultimate of what a *Yid* should and could achieve — to have his head enveloped in an aura of *kedusha* while being able to think of others around him, providing their needs and elevating them along with him. To engage in the world we live in, while aspiring that one's spirit be immersed in the loftiness of *ruchniyus*, is the fulfillment of Hashem's desire for His people. What seems to be an impossible dichotomy is made possible through true adherence to Torah.

It is this fusion that perhaps best characterizes the personality that was Rav Shimon Alster.

He was a man of depth and intellect. A *baal machshovah*, not only in the sense that he was familiar with the esoteric aspects of Torah, but also in a literal sense; he was a profound thinker whose *hashkofos* were processed and internalized to the point that they became part of his essence. *Talmidim* recall that while he never jumped to conclusions, *hashkofah* questions they asked him would get an immediate response. They had already been thought about, dissected, and clarified.

He was removed from the desires of this world, not because he didn't understand the enjoyment they provide, but because he understood the shallowness of such enjoyment. He understood that a *Yid* is *rosho magia haShomaymah*.

And yet, he related to all types with ease, to the *ben Torah* and *talmid chochom* as well as to the *baal habayis* in *shul*. Amongst his *talmidim* are elevated *bonei Torah* and professional lawyers and accountants. He was comfortable with them all and took pride in them all.

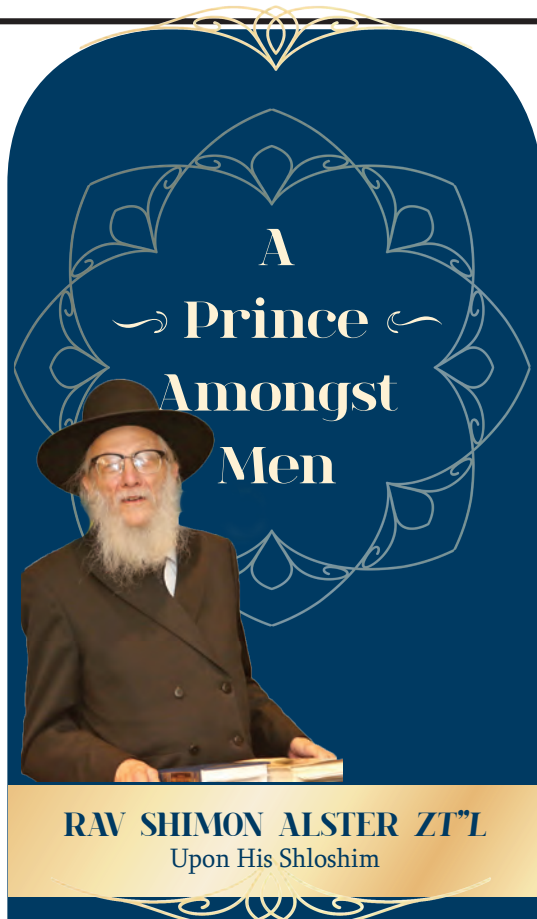
Working on this article was a fascinating experience, because rarely does one find an individual who is understood and described by different people with such a variety of adjectives.

Reb Shimon is different though. Each *talmid* has his own way of describing his *rebbe*, because he meant something else to each one. He related to each on his level, and thus made different impressions on each one.

The Wunderkind of the West Side

That Reb Shimon's traumatic youth did not affect him emotionally demonstrates super-human *kochos hanefesh* and an indomitable spirit. That he was able to transcend it and grow into a leader and *marbitz Torah* for hundreds of *talmidim* is testimony to an unfathomable passion and unstoppable determination to reach the fullest of his potential.

Born to Reb Yosef Shmuel and Gittel Alster in 1946, Rav Shimon was orphaned of his father as an infant of six months old. An only



child, his father's *petirah* left Shimon and his mother completely alone. It is hard to imagine the heartbreaking emptiness that pervaded their apartment, which was situated on the seventeenth floor of a high-rise building on the West Side. Or those lonely *Shabbosos*, with neither of them having anyone but each other as company.

That wasn't Shimon's only challenge. It was a time and place when the word *yeshiva bochur* was foreign and considered obsolete; this was America, circa the 1950s. Every parent wanted their child to be successful, go to college and become a doctor or a lawyer.

But young Shimon Alster sought a different sort of success. His dream was to become a *talmid chochom*. A dream that defied all odds.

A cousin of Mrs. Alster, Reb Dovid Spira, lived alone in Queens, NY, and kept up with the Alster family. He had served as a *gabbai* of the Belzer family. He was saved from the Nazi inferno together with the Belzer Rov. As Shimon grew older, Reb Dovid occasionally invited him to come for *Shabbos*, and the two would utilize the time to bond.

It was a bond of mutual benefit; Shimon

would receive some fatherly love, while Reb Dovid was able to impart to the little boy sparks of light and share the glory of *Yiddishkeit*. Reb Dovid would regale him with stories and concepts that lit a virtual fire in Shimon's heart. The world he lived in, the culture he was surrounded by, was but a facade; a life of truth lay ahead.

He began learning with an unquenchable thirst, *davening* with intensity, and allowing his mind to imagine a future far beyond the limitations of what everyone expected of him.

He would walk to shul each *Shabbos* alone, with no father to hold his hand or point to the right page. But even at that age, he carried himself with a dignity that bespoke his youth and tragic past.

Reb Akiva Besser (brother of Reb Chatzkel Besser) took note of the boy, and would refer to him as "*de vunderkind*." Together with his son, Naftali Besser, Reb Akiva began walking Shimon home from *shul* each *Shabbos*. When Shimon was twelve years old, he informed Reb Akiva that he didn't feel comfortable relying on the doorman to press the buttons on the elevator — the accepted practice by all

in those days — and he had decided that he would walk up all seventeen flights of stairs.

When he reached eighth grade, he informed his mother that he wanted to travel to Eretz Yisroel to learn. The high school choices he had here were simply not enough to satisfy his desires. With tears in her eyes, Mrs. Alster saw her fourteen-year-old son off. She pined for him greatly, often crying herself to sleep, but she knew that it was the right choice. He was accepted into Yeshivas Kol Torah, where Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach served as *rosh yeshiva*.

He would send home letters detailing how he was changing slowly, developing not only in learning, but in donning the *tzurah* of a *ben Torah*.

It was not an easy adjustment. The food was a far cry from what he was used to, and Rav Yehoshua Neuwirth, *mechaber sefer She'mitas Shabbos K'hichaso*, and a *rebbe* in the *yeshiva*, took to the young *Americaner*, assuring that he had a *leben* each day. The *Yerushalmi bocharim* couldn't get enough of their American peer, and expressed their concern that when he returned to the *treifene medina*, he shouldn't lose it all.

They had nothing to worry about.

When he returned to America almost three years later, he was hardly recognizable. He had developed and matured. He had imbued so much in Eretz Yisroel, learning from and about the *gedolei Yisroel*, and he had his sights set on *gadlus*. He was ready for a life of Torah.

He joined Yeshivas Chasan Sofer and learned under his *rebbe muvhak*, Rav Binyomin Paler. Later when Rav Paler opened his own *yeshiva*, Yeshivas Mekor Chaim, Rav Shimon went along with him.

He continued learning under Rav Paler for ten years, remaining even after he got married and got a *shetler*. At twenty-three Reb Shimon married his first wife, Rebetzin Esther Kriendel a"h, a daughter of Rav Avrohom Yosef Weiss, a distinguished *talmid chochom* and *rov* of the Moriah Shul in the West Side.

It was only a short while later that Reb Shimon made his entrance into the world of *harbotzas Torah*. Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock, one of the prime *talmidim* of Rav Aharon Kotler, and *rosh yeshiva* of Mesivta of Long Beach, was looking for someone to lead second *seder* in the fledgling *yeshiva*. Rav Feigelstock heard about this special *youngerman* and was interested in meeting him. The two met — the conversation lasting three hours — after which the *rosh yeshiva* exclaimed, "Rav Aharon *vult hanaach gehat fun dir* — Rav Aharon Kotler would have had pleasure from you!"

And so it was. Rav Yitzchok asked Rav Shimon, who was close to twenty years his junior, to join him in his *avodas hakodesh*. In what serves as testimony to the level of trust the *rosh yeshiva* had for his younger peer, Reb Shimon was given full authority of the entire second *seder*, and could decide to lead it as he chose. The two would speak every single night to discuss each and every *bocher's* growth, and worked in tandem to build generations of *bonei Torah*. He was hardly a few years older than the *bocharim*, but his very carriage and depth commanded respect, with many of the boys not realizing his true age.

Reb Yossi Brachfeld was from the first group of *bocharim* to learn under Reb Shimon in Long Beach and reminisced about the impact he made on the *bocharim*.

"I learned in Chasan Sofer while he was there. I was just a few years younger than him,

and then when he got the *shetler* he suggested I come along. It is hard to imagine what the Jewish world looked like at that time and the impact he made on us. We were mostly children of Holocaust survivors, and we had no idea what it meant to be a *ben Torah*. We never saw anything of that sort.

"And he took us by the hand and guided us, step by step. He showed us the beauty of Torah, the beauty of *Yiddishkeit*. He molded us in learning, and in every area of life. He was charting a course in uncharted territory. He was our model, and we wanted to live the life he was offering.

"In one-on-one conversation and during the *vaadin* he gave, Reb Shimon would describe what a *Shabbos* should look like, how to celebrate a *Yom Tov*. He would tell the eager *bochurim* how a day in *bein hazemanim* should be spent, how a *ben Torah* builds a *Yiddishe* home. He was there for us at every step, long after we left *yeshiva* to guide us along.

"And he was so normal. He would never use the words "you can't..."; it was "you should..." He had a way of trivializing the culture we were used to, enabling us to see through its falsehood."

For almost thirty-five years, Rav Shimon would be one of the formative figures in the lives of the *bochurim* of Long Beach, making an indelible imprint on the lives of hundreds of *talmidim*. Later, in 2004, Rav Shimon left



The *bochurim* were mostly *Chassidische* boys, but Rav Shimon managed to connect to them, teaching them how to take apart a *sugya* and make it all come together again. One of the highlights was the way he broadened their *hasagos* with the Friday morning *Chumash shiur*. He opened their minds to think about concepts and events they took for granted, such as *Krias Yam Suf* and *Mattan Torah*. Many years later, these *bochurim* still fondly recall those few months with relish and credit Rav Shimon for forming their view on *Yiddishkeit*.

Learning and Teaching

The way he taught was both original and engaging. At that time, the standard way of teaching Torah was by giving enlightening *shiurim*.

Rav Shimon had a different approach.

It wasn't long before a famil-

forth by the *bochurim*, and with breathtaking precision explain what was *shver* with each one. The boys would be spellbound. After sifting through the different *mehalachim*, a clear outline would start to appear, and only then would they begin dissecting *Rashi*, *Tosafos*, and the *Ris-honin*.

Soon they all had a clear grasp of the basics of the *sugya*, and could continue learning on their own.

One *talmid* marvels at Rav Shimon's ability to maintain a delicate balance with the *talmidim*.

"While we were sitting there around his *shetder*, we felt so close to him. We could even crack a joke and await a sharp retort. But when we were done, he would rise and we felt a sudden rush of awe. He would walk out with graceful steps, carrying himself as the dignified prince he was. We were often left wondering if this was the same person. We were taken in by his majestic air, while feeling at ease with his disarming smile.

"Some *rabbeim* lower themselves to their *talmidim* to connect to them. Others are from a different generation but serve as a *demus* to the *bochurim* of what a *ben Torah* should strive for. Rav Shimon



to open Yeshiva Gedolah of Cliffwood, where he succeeded in molding hundreds more into true *beni Torah*.

These were not the only places he was *maspita* on *talmidim*. In 1991, with the start of the Gulf War, most American *bochurim* learning in Eretz Yisroel returned to the States due to the precarious *matzav*. Rav Moshe Hillel Hirsch, *rosh yeshiva*, Slabodka, asked Rav Shimon to give *shiur* to the *bochurim* in his *yeshiva*, who had formed a *kevutzah* in Boro Park.

iar ritual was established in *yeshiva*. Rav Shimon would walk into the *bais midrash* at the beginning of *sefer* and call over two or three *chavrusashafets*. The *bochurim* would gather around him, sitting with their *Gemaros* open on their *shenders*, and they would start learning. He would go around from one *bochur* to the next, listening intently as they explained the *pshat* of the *Gemara*. He would highlight the differences between the approaches put



straddled both worlds. He was with us, but he was apart from us. He was from a different world, but he connected to us, elevating us toward the heights he had reached."

Sulam matzav artzah v'rosho magia haShamaymah.

Writing a tribute to Rav Shimon Alster z"l without a collection of at least some of his pithy quips would be missing an integral part of the portrait portrayed. A master of words, Rav Shimon had a unique way of vividly communicating the messages he felt were important. These messages were a product of incredibly deep analysis of what is important, true, and proper. We include some of these classics shared by *talmidim* of Rav Shimon, for *talmidim* to remember and others to learn from.

"Extremism. People are afraid of being an extremist. The Chazon Ish writes that extremism and *gadlus* are synonymous. Let's not say extremism. Let's say perfectionism. I want my *ruchnius* to be perfect, not mediocre."

On *Gadlus*

"What is the defining characteristic of an *adam gadol*? Small *maasim*. Small people are always busy with the big things; a bigger person is meticulous about the small deeds he does."

On Answering Back

"The Chazon Ish once told someone who answered back when he was insulted. 'You didn't answer back like a *ben Torah*. *V'azoy enfert ah ben Torah? Ah ben Torah enfert nish!* A *ben Torah* doesn't answer back!'"

"There are two ways to steal from someone. Open robbery and pick-pocketing. Pick-pocketing is usually more effective."

He would use this to explain that the most effective way to have a haspoo'ah on someone is not by confronting them, but to connect with them, and then "slip in" the ideas, in a way that they barely realize they are being changed.

"A true compliment for a *rebbe* is not when the *talmid* says something in his name, but when he says over his *rebbe*'s words back to the *rebbe* without realizing that they are from him."

"The *avar* is *zichronos*. The *asid* is *chalomos* and *dimyonos*. And the *hoveh*? The *hoveh* is *nisyonos*."

"The instant you stop growing — the very instant the apple stops growing on the tree — that very instant, while it's still on the tree: that's when it starts rotting."

"People want to be different, but there is nothing special about being different. In-steed, be better, and being better is indeed different."

"You don't need to stand out; you need to be outstanding."

"How can I call them *talmidim*, when I learned from them more than they from me?"
He used to quote this in the name of Rav Akiva Eiger, accepting it as his own mehalech as well.

"If Chazal don't say it, it's not part of *Yiddishkeit*."
He would say this regarding the passing fads that people tend to get attracted to as a form of avodas Hashem. The litmus test of the truth of these trends is whether they have a source in Chazal.

On *Gaavah* and *Anavah*

"What is *anavah*? *Anavah* doesn't necessarily mean that you think you are smaller than the other person; it means that how great you are doesn't affect your relationship with him — just like the degree of how intelligent a person is, doesn't make a difference in the relationship he has with a baby."

"There is nothing wrong with thinking you are great, so long as you don't mind your friend being great too."

"When someone asks a *baal habayis* what he does, he really means to ask if he is financially successful. You know what you should answer? 'I'm learning *Bava Kamma*, how about you?'"

"Often you ask a successful *baal habayis* how things are going, and he responds, 'Hodu laHashem ki tov!' To the discerning ear, the tone used is similar to the words 'Kochi v'otzem yodi osah li es hachayil hazeh!'"
I.e., just saying the words isn't enough. One has to truly internalize that Hashem is the One Who provides and sustains.

"Which *maamar* did you *daven* with?"

In Chabad, they would learn a maamar from one of their rebbes before davening and then go daven. The Chassidim would then ask each other which maamar they focused on during davening. Lesson: When you start davening know what you are going to be thinking about.

"What is the epitome of *mentchlichkeit*? In every conversation, relationship, or interaction, there is one person who needs the other person more. *Mentchlichkeit* is not letting on that you are needed."

In *shiur* as well, his *mehalach* was rich and unique. He would explain the different *Rishonim* and why they explain the *Gemara* the way they did.

"The *rosh yeshiva* didn't just give us the *reid*," Reb Yitzy Gross, a *talmid* explains. "He gave us the background. Every *chiddush* that he said was based on something that forced him to say it and he showed it to us clearly. He demonstrated how the *Pnei Yehoshua's mehalach* to a *sugya* was different from Rav Chaim's, and that is why he explained it one way, while Rav Chaim took another approach. We walked away not just knowing the *sugya*, but understanding the underpinnings of it too."

The Torah he learned and expected his *talmidim* to learn was real. There was no room for abstractness. A *bochur* once came over to his *shinder* and told him a *mehalech* in the *sugya*.

Rav Shimon wasn't satisfied. There was too much fluff and generalization. "Try to tell me that one more time, but this time with your eyes open and your feet on the ground," he urged the *bochur*.

To Be a Yid

Rav Shimon had a deep appreciation for *Yiddishkeit*, *mesorah*, and Jewish history. He knew the origin of *Yiddish* names and would offer advice to fathers of newborns what name to give.

He lived with the *gedolim* of previous generations before his eyes, and studied their *hashkofos*, their words and their lives.

He would quote entire segments from *Igros Chazon Ish*. He once told a *talmid* that a day doesn't go by during which he didn't think about the *Chazon Ish*. The first time he received the *sefer Kreina D'Igrasa* from the Steipler Gaon, he simply couldn't put it down.

He was always thinking through the lens of what Rav Paler or Rav Shach would say.

He maintained impeccable *middos tovos*, something he said he gleaned from reading about Rav Isser Zalman.

The way he united his family of *talmidei chachomin* with the Leeder family of his second Rebbetzin Leah Alster, was a lesson in interpersonal relationships and *kavod ishto*.

One particular *hanhogah* he incorporated from Rav Isser Zalman was to sit together with the *baalei batim* of the *shul* at *simchos*, rather than sitting on the dais with other *rabbonim*. "These are the people I *daven* with," he'd quip.

Stories of all *gedolim* were incorporated into his mundane talk, as well as the *shmuessen* he gave. Such as Rav Moshe's insight into *shalom bayis*, or the way Rav Boruch Ber was careful to greet a fellow *Yid*.

Always Learning, Always Teaching

Ever the *talmid*, he was always learning. He loved to simply sit at his *shinder* and delve into the *Gemara* again, allowing himself to swim deeper and deeper into the refreshing waters of the *Yam HaTalmud*. After *shiur*, he would often sit back in his seat, a look of serene contentment evident on his features. "It's so *geshmak* to be able to learn!" he'd exclaim to himself.

A *talmid* remembers how he asked him which *kabbalah* he should make for the new year. Rav Shimon, true to his essence, told him to choose one *maamar Chazal* each day and think about it for the entire day.

He himself was often seen engrossed in thought. A *bochur* was standing outside of Long Beach *yeshiva* when he noticed Rav Shimon pull up. As he got out of his car, he exclaimed, "Wow! How did I get here so fast? I was thinking about a *Tosafos*, and suddenly

Shimon, recalls, "I once told him that I was planning on learning *Derech Hashem* with the *bochurim*, and I asked him what the main point I should try to impart to them should be.

"That a *sefer Torah* is not just a piece of *klaf* that was *me'ubad lishmah*, with a *sofer's* inscription. A *sefer Torah* has *kedusha*!"

The Torah is alive, and its *kedusha* is relevant to all of us, today, as always.

His teachings made the subject alive and real. Everything about him was real. If it



I'm here!"

One of the main things he wanted from his *talmidim* was that they learn not just what to do, but how to think. Often, if someone asked him a question, he would reply by asking what the questioner thought about it. Rav Shimon would then dissect his answer to determine if it was right.

He fulfilled Chazal's dictum of *halomed mikol odom*, opening his mind to be inspired by all those around him. He was extremely impressive and internalized all that he saw and heard.

The way a little boy's eyes opened wide when he heard Rav Shimon describe *krias Yam Suf* was a charge Rav Shimon didn't let go of. "We should also become overtaken when we think about Hashem's *nissim*!"

A *baal habayis* in *shul* told him that when the daily *shiur* is over at 7 a.m., his day is over. Rav Shimon would repeat the sentiment to his *talmidim*, saying that this was the true definition of *melachto arai v'Soraras keva*, making Torah the central point of your life.

He once heard a *rebbe* in camp teaching the boys *Parashas Mattos*. "Lo yacheil de-varo, K'chol hayotzei mipiv yaaseh." A *Yid's* mouth is *heilig*, the *rebbe* explained, and if he doesn't fulfill his words, he defiles his mouth, making it "*vuchendig*." Rav Shimon didn't tire from repeating this lesson to his *talmidim*.

We are different. We are *heilig*. Our mouths are *heilig*, and our *neshamos* are *heilig*. Our existence is *magia haShomaymah*!

Indeed, at his initial meeting with Rav Feigelson, Rav Shimon was asked if he was also capable of giving *vaadim*. "I don't know if I could give a *shmuessa*," he replied, "but I could show them how a *Yid* *yz andersh*, a *Yid* is different!"

Rav Yisroel Parnes, a *maggid shiur* in *Yeshivas Ohr Olam*, and a close *talmid* of Rav

didn't withstand the *emes* test, it was disregarded.

He taught his *bochurim* how to view current events and how to feel the pain of another *Yid*, especially those living in Eretz Yisroel. A child, he would say, thinks only about himself. There is only one person in the equation. An adult must incorporate others. It is not about me, here, and now. We must think about others, about *Klal Yisroel*. He had the *bochurim* in *yeshiva* write letters to the parents of fallen Israeli soldiers telling them that they are learning *Mishnayos l'zecher nishmas* their beloved sons.

A family from Cleveland called during the *shivah* and told of a letter Rav Shimon had written to them when their son was tragically killed outside the Denver *Yeshiva*. "You don't know who I am," he wrote, "but you should know that I feel your pain."

"This letter still gives us *chizuk*," they said.

Every interaction with him was rich and meaningful, a teaching moment in its own right.

Rav Shimon walked into the *beis midrash* once with a whole collection of pens. "An one need a pen?" he asked out loud. Later he explained what happened. There was a *Yid* outside who was selling pens. "No one wanted to buy, because fifty cents a pen is a rip-off. But if he would be collecting *zedakah* they would eagerly give it to him. They don't realize that this is his way of collecting. Buying the pens is his way of giving him *zedakah*."

Often the lessons were given over wordlessly, and were understood just as well.

A *talmid* recalls seeing the *rosh yeshiva* with a sweater under his frock, clearly under the weather. While speaking to him at his *shinder*, the *rosh yeshiva* leaned forward and said with his trademark half smile, "The doc-

tor thinks I'm sitting back and sipping piping hot tea..."

One summer *zeman* during *shiur*, a *bochur* piped up with a good *kashya*. Rav Shimon was quiet for a moment before agreeing that it was a good question. A few weeks later, the *zeman* was over, and that *bochur* went to the *rosh yeshiva* to take leave before going to camp.

"I have an answer to your question," the *rosh yeshiva* told him.

Question? What question? the *bochur* wondered to himself.

"The question you asked in the middle of *shiur*," the *rosh yeshiva* continued. "Do you remember it?"

Unfortunately, he did not. He had felt like a million dollars when he asked it, but he had quickly moved past it.

But he understood the message. Yes, the *zeman* was over. Yes, he was leaving to go have some fun and air out. But he mustn't forget the supremacy of *limud haTorah*.

Belittling the Unimportant

The keen observer that he was, Rav Shimon had a razor-sharp view of right and wrong. This acute understanding enabled him to highlight the follies of the *yetzer hara's* distractions.

"The *Gemara* says that all *leitzonus* is *asur*, other than *leitzonus* of *avodah zarah*," he would say. "And everything other than a *yeshiva bochur* at his *Gemara* is *avodah zarah*!" *Talmidim* recall that twinkle in his cool blue eyes as he took apart and mocked *Olam Hazeih* and all its glitters.

He would analyze a new ad, a new style, or fad, and strip it of its appeal. His sense of humor was sharp; his expressions were memorable, and his messages were timeless.

With his inimitable manner, he succeeded in demanding growth in an undemanding way, just by showing what is really important. And most astonishingly, he knew how to keep his charges positive, and not make them feel cheapened. They would walk away not feeling down, but feeling rejuvenated with the clarity he instilled.

Fatherly Love

Close to thirteen years ago, Rav Shimon lost his wife after a prolonged illness. During the *shivah*, the *talmidim* of Cliffwood *Yeshiva* came to be *menachem* their beloved *rosh yeshiva*.

He looked up, nodding gingerly to each and every *bochur*, eighty in total.

Then he turned to one of them and asked, "Where is Shmuel?"

Shmuel Berkowitz's father had passed away that very day, and he couldn't come. Rav Shimon, enveloped as he was in his personal pain, noticed that one *bochur* was missing. One of his boys was not there.

Later, when Shmuel got in touch with the *rosh yeshiva* and told him the *besturah*, Rav Shimon asked him, "Do you know what your *achrayus* is now?"

"I'm not sure... To remember who my father was, and continue in his footsteps?"

"No. Your job is to be there for your mother. She needs you now more than ever."

Another teaching moment. Always *mitzvah artzah*.

His clarity was intense but refreshing. A *marbitz Torah*, whose teenage son was very ill, asked Rav Shimon for advice. He used to give a couple of *shiurim* each *Shabbos*, and wanted to know if he should give up on the potential *zechus* of the Torah learned so that he could be at his son's bedside.

"I can't answer you about the *zechuyos*," Rav Shimon said, "but a father belongs together with his son."

Every *talmid* of his felt like the one who mattered most to the *rosh yeshiva*. He was there for them constantly to guide and impart wisdom and warmth.

He was sought out by many each day, and he managed to answer every single questioner. Someone once looked at his phone when he stepped out of his office and saw there were eighty-three missed calls! And still he never left a call unanswered. This, despite being in *bais midrash* from early in the morning until late at night. His son, Rav Mordechai, says that there was only a window of under four hours during the day that he wasn't learning with the *bochurim* or the *baalei batim*.

Often, when asked about a *shidduch* or a school choice, Rav Shimon would even do his own research before giving an answer. His daughter, Mrs. Malka Olshin, adds that he had no personal needs; the only way they could ever help him was when he needed information about a high school, a doctor, or something else for one of his "children." (That is how he would refer to his *talmidim* and *mispallelim*, even when speaking to his actual children.)

A *talmid* called him one night at 1 a.m., a sense of urgency in his voice. He was making a *bris* the next day, and he didn't have what to say. Rav Shimon told him to look up a piece in the *Bais Halevi* and call him back when he was done, so they could discuss it.

"But my mother-in-law will be here soon, and I won't be able to call until it quiets down," the young father replied.

"So call me back whenever she leaves, I'll be waiting for you."

In another instance, a *yungerman* called the *rosh yeshiva* at 2 a.m.; he was heading to the hospital with his laboring wife, and they had a medical issue to discuss.

The *rosh yeshiva* gave his advice and told the *yungerman* to call back whenever the issue was resolved. But things got hectic and very soon there was a *mazel tov*; in the excitement, he forgot to call his *rosh yeshiva* back.

At 5:45, his phone started ringing; the *rosh yeshiva* was waiting for an answer and had called to

make sure everything was ok.

He was extremely in tune with others' needs and would be careful that their feelings and needs should be reckoned with.

In the summer, Yeshivas Long Beach would go to Camp Horim, and Rav Shimon was the one charged with leading the *yeshiva*. One year, *Rosh Chodesh Av* came out on *Shabbos Parshas Mattos-Massei*, and *davening* ended exceptionally late. Someone suggested that the *seudah* be pushed off so that the *bochurim* could have their regular *Shabbos* morning learning *sefer*. Rav Shimon decided otherwise. "There is a cook, there are waiters; all of them worked hard and want to be able to get a rest. We shouldn't impose our learning on them." A *sefer* was added after the *seudah* instead. Learning at the expense of someone else is not an embodiment of being a true *ben Torah*.

to grow, and he would be there for them.

Not long after the *shul* was established, he met a *talmid* and said, "What does success mean? Does it mean a lot of people coming to *daven*? A big building, 'Rabbi Alster's shul'?"

"No!" he concluded. "Success means individuals who grow. Slowly, one at a time. A little bit more learning and more *davening* and

his two *bochurim* to learn in Eretz Yisroel. The *rov* turned to the man's little girls and said with a big smile, "Your brothers aren't home now, but girls can also sing *zemiros*!"

A *mispallel* was making his first *bar mitzvah*, and the Rav offered to help prepare the *psheet*. When it was done, he told the boy to come practice it at the *bimah* with the *rov* sitting in the back to ensure he was saying it loud enough.



The Shul

A *talmid* might build a close *keshes* with a *rebbe*, but there is a relationship that is perhaps even more profound; that of a *rov* and the *mispallelim* of his *shul*. The *rov* lives with his *mispallelim*, day in day out, spends *Shabbosos* and *Yomim Tovim* together, and gets to know their families as well. He shares their *simchos* and is part of their lives.

Rav Shimon Alster had many hundreds of *talmidim* from Long Beach and Cliffwood, and the impact he made on them was immeasurable.

But then there was the *shul*. Established in 1995 by a small group of *baalei batim*, many of them former *talmidim* of his, Beis Midrash Torah U'Tefillah stands out as a serious *kehillah* in Flatbush. The group approached Rav Shimon and asked if he could serve as their *rov*, and he responded by asking each one why they wanted a *shul*. Later he explained that before accepting the position he wanted to know if they were ready to be *mekabel* from him. If not, there was really no point, he said. But if they wanted



becoming more serious. And slowly the families change, and the next *dor* looks different. A few people, real, small changes, yes, that's success...

The way he affected this change was by making the *shul* his family. Their *simchos* were his. Their successes were his. And he took part in their struggles and challenges as if they were his own.

He greatly appreciated the work any of the *gabba'im* put in to keep the *shul* operating smoothly.

"Some people believe that a *shul* runs with a Big Bang Theory," he would quip. "But nothing happens by itself."

His wives, both *Rebbetzin Esther a'h* and *tibi'ch* *Rebbetzin Leah*, built warm and meaningful relationships with the women of the *shul*. They were one big happy family.

A *mispallel* remembers meeting the *rov* outside, shortly after sending

The *rov* like to tell of the time when Rav Shach delivered a fiery speech in Yerushalayim, during a tense political time in Israeli politics. Recordings of the speech spread quickly, and everyone, from the young *bochurim* to *rabbonim* and *roshei yeshiva*, made time to listen to it. Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock asked Rav Shimon what he took out of the speech, and he responded, "I heard him start off by saying, 'Teiyere brider un shvester — dear brothers and sisters...'"

Rav Yitzchok loved his answer and agreed fully.

There are times when a *manhig* must speak strongly, but it is always *mein brider un shvester* that he is addressing.

When speaking to the *mispallelim*, he would address them not as disciples, but as comrades. "Ahuva, v'yadedei..." He wouldn't refer to them directly, rather choosing to

speak with the pronoun "we."

They were in it together. They went through life's events together. First as parents, then as grandparents. At the yearly *shul Melaveh Malkah*, he would give what the *kehillah* lovingly referred to as the State of the Union Address. He would speak to them, with them, and discuss the meaning of each stage they were in.

"What does it mean to make a *bar mitzvah*? What is our responsibility when our children get married?"

Often, at these events, he would challenge them to grow, to think, and to realign their priorities.

"If you see a *Yid* with a long white beard biting into a slice of pizza in his car, you would think it's funny, right? Why? Because he's a *zeide!* When are we going to view ourselves as *zeides*?" he challenged.

At the *Melaveh Malkah* last year, the *rov* asked rhetorically, "Do we still have the same excuses we used to have? Are we still busy with our children? Do we have the courage to face life's changing circumstances?"

While speaking in *shul*, the *rov* would engage the *mispallelim*, allowing the thought he was sharing to resonate, to develop.

"Let's say it one more time..." he would say, explaining the same concept with a variation to perhaps clarify and reinforce it.

He taught them how to think, how to view their lives like *bnei Torah*. That was his life's mission, to raise generations, to connect to them and lift them up the ladder, one rung at a time.

And now, bereft of their guiding light, hundreds of families of his *ahuvim v'yedidim* and the countless *talmidim* he inspired, long to hear his voice, just one more time, urging them forward, upward, towards the ultimate truth.

Yehi zichro boruch.

The family and *talmidim* are looking to compile memories of Rav Shimon z"l, which can be submitted via email: memoriesofrshimon@gmail.com. The writer thanks the many *talmidim* who shared their *zichronos* for this article, including *Reb Yossi Ziskind* and many others.

1 Name has been changed.