

REBBETZIN ESTHER ALSTER A”H

By C.B. Weinfeld

This past *Shabbos, Parshas Bo*, Rebbetzin Esther Alster’s family surrounded her bedside in the hospital, as her final hours drew near. On *Motzoei Shabbos*, she seemed to rally slightly, and Rav Shimon Alster, her illustrious husband, left to join his *bochurim* at the Yeshiva Gedolah of Cliffwood, NJ, which gave his Rebbetzin such joy. Shortly after he arrived at the *yeshiva* to be with his *talmidim*, his Rebbetzin’s *neshama* soared heavenward.

As a son-in-law later attested at the *levaya*, “When our mother realized that our father was in *yeshiva*, the only place she wanted him to be, she left this world at peace, with a smile on her face.”

For Rebbetzin Alster, a devoted *mechaneches*, *rebbetzin* of a thriving *kehillah*, and source of *chizuk* for so many, her husband’s *yeshiva* was the focus of her life. “She would make compote for the *bochurim*,” recalled a co-worker at the Bnos Yaakov Pupa Girls School, where Rebbetzin Alster was a respected principal for nearly three decades. “I would ask her jokingly, ‘Why don’t you make compote for the girls?’ She really cared about her girls, but the *bochurim* were special. She lived for the *yeshiva*, for her husband’s *harbotzas haTorah*.”

The *petirah* of Rebbetzin Alster at the relatively young age of 62, after a painful illness, is a tremendous blow to the Torah community. In her six decades on this world, Rebbetzin Alster touched thousands of people’s lives, making an indelible impression upon all who knew her.

Born in 1949 to her parents, Rav Avrohom Yosef Weiss and his Rebbetzin, the daughter of Dr. Refoel Muller, leader of the Washington Heights *kehillah*, Esther Kreindel spent her childhood in an elevated atmosphere of Torah. Rav Weiss was the *rov* of a *kehillah* in Washington Heights and later became the spiritual leader of the famous Moriah *shul* on the West Side in Manhattan (also known as the Belgian *shul*), where Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik delivered his famous weekly *shiur*. She absorbed the values of her illustrious parents and channeled them into her own home, building a fortress of *kedushah* which radiated outward, creating ripples throughout the Torah world.

“She personified Torah, *avodah* and *gemillus chassodim*,” attested a niece. “Torah, because of her tremendous *mesirus nefesh* for her husband’s and children’s learning. She worked for years, not for luxuries, but in order to help her married children, all of whom are *bnei Torah*.”

“*Avodah*, of course, is the *shul*, where my aunt was an equal partner with her *choshuveh* husband, the *rov*. The *kehillah* had her imprint in every corner. She welcomed the women, united them into one happy family, and had their children in mind. Aunt Esther ensured that the *shul* was always spic and span, beautifully decorated, and treated as a *makom kedushah*.”

“As far as *gemillus chassodim* is concerned, just ask the thousands of friends she

made, the singles she counseled for hours, the families she helped during times of crisis. Aunt Esther was a one-woman *gemillus chessed* band.

“I’ll never forget the *Shabbos* my parents were making *sheva brachos* for my sister,” her niece continued. “My mother was home, manning the home front, while Aunt Esther spent the entire day in the hall setting up the flowers, the platters, ensuring that the *simcha* was beautiful. It was impossible to tell that this was the *simcha* of a niece and not her own daughter. And this is in addition to hosting a lavish *sheva brachos* in her own home, on short notice. Most importantly, she made everything appear so easy. It was all ‘no problem,’ ‘my pleasure,’ and ‘how else can I help?’ Aunt Esther was literally the glue that held our family together. I can’t imagine how life can go on without her.”

“When our mother realized that our father was in *yeshiva*, the only place she wanted him to be, she left this world at peace, with a smile on her face.”

And it wasn’t just her extended family. All the members of the *shul* were her children. Their *simchos* were her *simchos* and their pain was her own.

“I consider Rebbetzin Alster as my second mother,” said one vibrant young mother, whose husband davens at Bais Medrash Torah U’Tefillah, founded and led by Rav Shimon Alster. “There are over 100 families in our *kehillah*, but we aren’t just a *kehillah*. We’re family. The Rebbetzin would ask for updates on our parents, married children, and even our single nieces. She had a special *gefil* for singles, for whom she always had time.”

Rebbetzin Alster derived tremendous *nachas* from the *shul* and strove mightily to unify the women into a ‘sisterhood,’ one large, vibrant family. “We had a *chessed* committee, sending suppers to new mothers, household help to those who needed it, and just looking out for one another,” said another member. “The Rebbetzin would sometimes whisper to me, ‘Go and befriend so-and-so. She looks like she can use a friendly smile.’ No matter how many women attended *shul*, the Rebbetzin never forgot a name.”

Similar sentiments are echoed by the staff and students at Bnos Yaakov Pupa, where Rebbetzin Alster was the dynamic English principal for decades.

“The Rebbetzin was an unforgettable *mechaneches*. Yes, I call her a *mechaneches* even though she was the English principal, because she was *kulo Torah*,” said one of the teachers. “Her entire mindset was *yashrus* personified. She never made *cheshbonos*, like ‘How can I say this best?’ or ‘How can I promote my ideas?’ It was always about the *emes*. Only the *emes*.”

“She was extremely fair and honest,” another staff member recalled. “Mrs. Alster, (as she was called in school) would look at a situation from every angle, with her *seichel hayo-*

shor, and her *hashkofos* were crystal clear. She had a tremendous *hisbatlus* to *gedolei Torah* and didn’t make a move without *daas Torah*.”

“I wasn’t such an easy student,” recalled an alumnus, now married with a family of her own. “I would be punished frequently and sent into the hallways. Although Mrs. Alster was a very strict principal, she was also fair and always interested in hearing my side of the story. She never knocked us or made us feel that we were to blame. With Mrs. Alster, I felt understood.”

“Once a year, in the spring, Mrs. Alster would host the girls for a *seudah shlishis*. We would all walk together, from Boro Park to Flatbush, making quite an impression,” an alumnus recalls. “The table would be beautifully set, with a lavish meal and an impressive program prepared. We looked forward to the beautiful *shiur* Mrs. Alster would deliver and

the *leibedig* singing and dancing afterward. She wasn’t just our principal. She was the center of our school!

“Her graduation speeches were a marvel,” the alumnus continued. “Her speeches were peppered with *maamarei Chazal* and deep insights. Her *Torahdike* essence permeated every aspect of her career.”

Despite her prestigious positions as wife of the *rosh yeshiva*, *rebbetzin* of her *shul* and successful principal of a girls’ school, Rebbetzin Alster was a very humble person.

“She had no ego, no sense of self,” a member of the *kehillah* recalled. “Nothing was beneath her. She would stop strangers on the street to greet them and invite them into her home. Widows, divorcees, women from all walks of life, would find their way to her doorway and emerge uplifted, ready to face the world.”

She was a soft-spoken, humble *rebbetzin*, a true *tzonuah* who did her numerous *chas-sodim* quietly, without drawing attention to herself. In fact, her closest friends and family were usually unaware of how many depended on her.

“I became very close to Rebbetzin Alster after my divorce,” said one woman, now happily remarried. “The Rebbetzin spent so much time with me, taking me under her wing. When I got engaged, the Rebbetzin was not well, yet she exerted herself to prepare a beautiful *melava malka* for my *chosson* and myself. She danced at my *chasunah* with such *simcha*, as if it was her own daughter. And, in a sense, I felt that I was her daughter. When she married off her son in Chicago recently, I traveled from overseas. There was no way I could miss the *simcha*! It was as if my own parents were making a *chasunah*.”

The Rebbetzin had hundreds of guests at the wedding. Nearly the entire *kehillah* traveled to Chicago to take part in the *simcha*. How she appreciated everyone who came or

went out of their way for her, even a tiny bit. Appreciating and thanking others was part and parcel of her personality.

Rebbetzin Alster’s *hakoras hatov* was legendary. If someone did her a favor, no matter how small, she remembered it for years. “I’ll never forget the evening I gave her a ride to Lakewood to attend a *simcha*,” an acquaintance recalled. “I was traveling to the *simcha* anyway. It was a pleasure to take her. For months afterwards, whenever I met her, she would thank me, again and again, for taking her to the *simcha*.”

“I thought this was extreme, until I heard the same thing from others. Anyone who ever did Rebbetzin Alster a favor would hear about it for years. She never forgot - and never tired of repeating - how much they helped her.”

When, towards the end of her life, the students and alumni of her school undertook to say *brachos* with concentration as a *zechus* for a *refuah sheleimah* for their dear principal, Rebbetzin Alster wrote a warm thank-you note, expressing her true appreciation for this *chessed*.

“I once hosted a tea for the *yeshiva* in my home,” said a member of the *shul*. “This must have been four or five years ago. For the next few years, until her final days, the Rebbetzin didn’t stop thanking me every time we met. She would go on and on about what a *zechus* I have and how grateful she was. One would think that I single-handedly supported the *yeshiva*, considering how effusive her thank you was. But that was just the Rebbetzin. She lived to give, not to receive.”

“In fact,” the woman remarked, “the Rebbetzin’s blood type was O-negative, which made it complicated for her to receive blood donations toward the end of her life. O negative blood types can donate to anyone, but can only receive blood from someone who is also O negative. That exemplified the Rebbetzin. She was someone who found it easier to give than to take. She was a true giver, a *baalas chesed* with every fiber of her being.”

“Even when she was suffering from her final illness, she pushed herself so as not to miss a single *simcha* or *shul* function,” attested another of the *shul* members. “Her family begged her not to go, but she felt as if she would be missing her own child’s *simcha*. ‘How can I miss So-and-so’s wedding?’ she would ask. So she got dressed, exerting herself to look beautiful, despite her weakness, to bring happiness to the *baalei simcha*.”

“When I had a baby recently, the Rebbetzin was in the final stages of her illness. But because I would drive her sometimes, she had tremendous *hakoras hatov*, and somehow managed to send beautiful gift, along with a handwritten letter, which took tremendous effort to write. Though my baby outgrew the snowsuit, I still cherish the letter she sent me.”

Students of Bnos Yaakov recall the Rebbetzin’s warmth and caring, her regal demeanor and the utmost *menthlichkeit* with which she conducted herself. Said one student, “She didn’t have to lecture us about *tznius*. Just look-



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ing at her beautiful attire and shining face was lesson enough. We learned, by observing the Rebbetzin, that being a *tzonuah* doesn't mean being 'nebbly' and outdated. Mrs. Alster was one of the most beautiful, put-together people we ever met. But her essence radiated dignity. She was royalty personified, a true queen."

Her *raison d'être*, say those closest to her, was being an *eved Hashem*. Although her home and *shul* were beautifully furnished, she took no pleasure in *gashmiyus*, except as a means to an end. "She used her *kochos* to enhance the *Ribono Shel Olam's* world," said an admirer. "All her pleasures were spiritual."

Undeniably, the *cheilek* of her life that gave her the most joy was her husband's *yeshiva*, Yeshiva Gedolah of Cliffwood. Rav Shimon founded the *yeshiva* after decades of serving as a respected *maggid shiur* at the Mesivta of Long Beach.

The Rebbetzin would often express the emotions the *yeshiva* engendered, declaring, "When I see my husband learning with the *bochurim*, being a *marbitz Torah*, my heart is full. What more can I ask for?" She never took his *harbotzas haTorah* for granted and



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constantly thanked Hashem for the *zechus*.

Rav Shimon and his Rebbetzin shared a powerful bond. She was a true *eizer*, an equal partner in all his accomplishments. The esteem and respect in which she held her husband was remarkable. Although she was an accomplished, brilliant woman in her own right, she considered herself as a helpmate, secondary to her husband's growth in Torah.

Rebbetzin Alster was a powerful speaker, whose annual *Shabbos Shuvah shiurim* attracted a large crowd. She would spend a good portion of the summer working on the *shiur*, adding insights and ideas, ensuring that it flowed. Although she was certainly capable of improvising or preparing a *shiur* at the last moment, that wasn't the Rebbetzin's style. Whatever she did was methodical, thought-out and carefully planned. She spent hours making the seating arrangements for the *Yomim Noraim* to ensure that each woman was satisfied.

"Whenever Mrs. Alster made a decision in school, I knew her words were *emes*," attested a co-principal. "Even if I would disagree, I knew that her words were coming from a pure place."

"She was honest to an amazing degree," echoed another staff member. "With Mrs. Alster, there was no beating around the bush. She said it like it was, but with such kindness and caring. She wasn't trying to impress anyone."

The Rebbetzin took great pleasure in making *shidduchim*. Years ago, she was the catalyst for a very successful *shidduch* between the children of two *mispaletlim*. "Our children are married for years already, but the Rebbetzin still considers them 'her' children. Every time we met, the Rebbetzin would marvel at the beautiful couple and their adorable children, as if they were her own *ainiklach*," said the mother of the young man.

Although she had a houseful of grandchildren of her own, her *ainiklach* really numbered in the hundreds, because she considered all the *shul* families, really everyone she knew, as her extended family.

"My brother and his wife had a baby before *Pesach*, and the *bris* was on the first days of *Pesach*," recalled a niece. "Making a *Pesach bris* is very complicated, with sleeping arrangements for the extended family, hosting the *kimpeturin*, and prepar-

ing a *Pesachdike bris*. Once more, it was Tante Esther to the rescue. She offered to make the *bris*, took the new mother into her home, and prepared a lavish *seudah*, making it all look like it wasn't a big deal. We took it for granted. With Tante Esther, everything was so easy and simple. It was only later that I realized it wasn't simple at all! Tante Esther had such a beautiful way of doing things, she made everything look effortless.

"When we got married, Tante Esther was the first to invite us for *Shabbos*, of course. We didn't feel like we were imposing when we went to her as newlyweds. And her *Shabbos* table...oh what a *Shabbos* table! The word that comes to mind is *malchusdik*. She was a queen, and her home was her palace."

Despite her lofty attributes, Rebbetzin Alster wasn't aloof or difficult to relate to. "When we traveled together to a family *simcha*, she was so much fun to be with," said another family member. "She would reminisce about her childhood, growing up in Washington Heights, and her school days. We felt like Tante Esther was one of us."

"And she had so many friends.

I can't tell you how many people I know today because of Tante Esther. She was involved in so many circles. She touched so many lives. I don't know how life will go on without her..."

The Rebbetzin was universally admired by all those who came in contact with her. "She was a *tzadeikes* from *amol*, from another generation. Even during her final illness, in the midst of her suffering, her face shone. She never complained. She never focused on herself and her pain. It was always, 'What can I do for you?' How can I give someone *chizuk*?"

"Often, after a difficult night, she would tell me in the morning, 'I can't thank Hashem enough for giving me another day of life, another chance to say *Modeh Ani*.' She wasn't just saying these platitudes. You could tell that they were part of her essence," said a close friend.

She would often speak about the power of *yissurim* to purify one's soul and how grateful she was for every situation the *Ribono Shel Olam* sent her. She had a personal relationship with her Creator and spoke to Him in her own words. This *kesher* was cultivated early on in her life, before her illness struck, and gave her the *koach* to rise above her challenges with inner beauty.

She is irreplaceable. To her *shul*, the Rebbetzin was the center of their lives. Her family, of course, considered her a queen. The thousands of alumni at Bnos Yaakov revered her. The impact that Rebbetzin Alster had upon *Klal Yisroel* cannot be described in words.

"You should have seen the sobbing at the *levaya*. I have never heard anything like it. Though most of the *hespeidim* were in Yiddish which many members of the *kehillah* do not understand, we did understand what they were saying. They were speaking the language of the heart," said one *kehillah* member.

Though the Rebbetzin did not merit *arichas yomim* on this world, the impact she made during her 62 years of life shall live on for generations. All her life, she worked to create a beautiful palace On High, never losing sight of her ultimate destination.

Now that she is in a better world, may she serve as a *melitzas yosher* for her family, for all those who depended on her, for the singles in her community, and for the rest of *Klal Yisroel*.

Yehi zichrah boruch.



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קריאת גדולי ישראל שליט"א

הננו בזה בקריאה נרגשת ומיוחדת אל אחינו בני ישראל, רחמנים בני רחמנים. לנוכח מצבם של הבחורים האומללים יואל זאב בן מירל ריסא חוה ויעקב יוסף בן רייזל אשר נתפסו במאסר במדינת יאפאן אחר שנפלו ברשתם של אנש בליעל שניצלו את תמימותם ועומדים לפני משפטם. וסכנה איומה של עינויים קשים ומרים וסבל עצום שיש בהם סכנת הגוף והנפש אורבת להם.

והנה נכנסו כמה עסקנים חשובים לעובי הקורה, ועוסקים במסירות נפש למצוא דרכים להקל מעליהם את סבלם, ולהוציאם ממיצר ולהצילם מרדת שחת. וכמובן שההשתדלויות עולות לסכומים גדולים מאוד מאוד. ובפרט הוצאות העורכי דין הגדולים.

ועל זה נפסק בשו"ע (ו"ד ס"י רנ"ב), כי אין מצוה גדולה כפדיון שבויים. והיא קודמת במעלה לשאר עניני צדקה, וכל רגע שמאחר לפדות השבויים כאילו שופך דמים ע"ש.

ע"כ באנו בזה לעורר שמחובתנו להטות שכם, ולעזור ולתמוך ולשאת בעול ההוצאות כל אחד מעבר ליכולתו, ולהיות לאחיעזר ואחיסמך לשלוחינו העוסקים בהצלמת במסירת נפש.

והעיקר הוא שמתבקש מכל אחד להתפלל ולהפציר ולהרבות בתפילה לפני שוכן מרומים שיחוס וירחם עליהם, ויוציאם מאפילה לאורה.

וזכות מצוה גדולה זו יעמוד לכל העוזרים והמסייעים להתברך בשפע ברכה והצלחה, וימלאו משאלות לבם לטובה. ונזכה כולנו לראות בישועת השי"ת בבגוא"צ בב"א.

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