

Remembering Rav Shimon Alster

The impact of the rosh yeshivah still remains



This week marks the *shloshim* for Rav Shimon Alster, *ztl*, the *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Gedolah of Cliffwood, New Jersey, and the longtime *rav* of Beis Medrash Torah Uffilah in Flatbush. Rav Shimon was the son of Reb Yosef Shmuel Alster, a successful diamond dealer from Galicia who moved to Antwerp before World War I. During World War II, he managed to escape the German invaders and eventually found his way to the United States.

In 1946, after ten years of marriage, the Alsters finally welcomed their first and only child. But their joy was short-lived. A few months after Rav Shimon's birth, tragedy struck. Reb Yosef Shmuel was on his way back from Antwerp when the Sabena plane he was on crashed into a mountain

in Gander, Newfoundland. He and 25 other passengers perished.

Shimon Alster grew up in Manhattan and attended a Jewish day school. Everyone was surprised when, at 14 years of age, he said that he wanted to learn in Eretz Yisrael. His mother wanted him to get a college degree, and going to Eretz Yisrael to learn was uncommon in those days, even for those brought up in a more *yeshivish* environment. She was reluctant to send him to a *yeshivah*, especially one that was so far away, until she received a letter from Rav Zelig Shifmanovitz, a friend of her late husband, who strongly endorsed the idea.

"It's rare for a young boy to want to dedicate his life to Torah study these days," Rav Shifmanovitz wrote. "I know that's not what you had in mind for his future, but you are fortunate that he is so motivated."

Young Shimon, accompanied by his mother, journeyed to Eretz Yisrael by boat. After visiting several other places, he eventually decided to attend Yeshivas Kol Torah, under the leadership of Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. He became a *talmid* of Rav Yonah Merzbach and Rav Yehoshua Neuwirth. Because he was the only American there, the *hanhalah* paid special attention to his needs. In his later years, Rav Alster often recalled Rav Shlomo Zalman's kindness to him.

The poverty he encountered in Eretz Yisrael also left a deep impression on the young American, who wasn't used to powdered milk, canned food and day-old bread. He marveled at the Israeli *bachurim* who were able to learn under such poor conditions, using it as an inspiration to further his own learning and *hasmadah*. During his time in Eretz Yisrael, Rav Shimon spent numerous

Shabbosos in Kfar Chasidim, basking in the influence of Rav Elya Lopian.

After three years of *shteiging* in Yeshivas Kol Torah, he returned to the United States. Following the advice of his father's *rebbe*, Rav Meir Leib Kagan, he attended Yeshivas Chasan Sofer. Rav Binyamin Paler took him under his wing, and he became his *talmid muvhak*. Rav Paler was a *talmid* of the Brisker Rav and instructed Rav Shimon in this *mehalech*. In fact, after Rav Paler's passing, his family sometimes asked Rav Shimon what Rav Paler's thoughts would have been on certain topics.

Rav Shimon married the daughter of Rav Avraham Yosef Weiss, a prominent *rav* on the Upper West Side and a *maggid shiur* in Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan. Shortly afterward, he applied for a position at the Mesivta of Long Beach. Although there was only a slim chance that Rav Yitzchok Feigelstock would choose him for the position, Rav Feigelstock was impressed by the *yungerman* and even told him that "Rav Aharon Kotler would have liked you." A few days after his interview, Rav Feigelstock called him to say that he had gotten the job.

Although he was only 25 years old at the time, he quickly earned the respect of his *talmidim*, who were only a few years younger. "He was mature beyond his years, and he was so outstanding that we didn't focus on his age. He led by example," an early *talmid* recalled. "I remember him coming over to me and my *chavrusa* and asking us about the *shiur*. He always made sure we were clear on the *sugyos* before delving into the

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Rishonim."

After many years as a successful *maggid shiur*, Rav Alster ventured out on his own and opened a *yeshivah* in Cliffwood, New Jersey.

Rav Alster learned with *balebatim* at 6 a.m. and then drove to Cliffwood to learn with *talmidim* before *Shacharis*. After a quick breakfast, he would go back to learn and to prepare his *shiur*. After *Minchah*, he delivered *vaadim* and *mussar* during *bein hashedarim*, and he then returned to toil over his Gemara for second *sefer*.

"It was only at 9:15 in the evening that he would finally leave to make sure he was on time for *Maariv* in his *shul*," the former *talmid* said. "Even after he became *rav*, he never changed his schedule. He often received prestigious invitations to speak, but these were not important to him; all that

mattered was Torah and those who studied it."

Rav Shimon had never considered becoming a *rav*, but in 1995 a few former *talmidim* approached him about opening a new *minyan* in Flatbush. "All of us were already members of *shuls*, but we felt there was something missing. I'm not sure why, but we all knew that Rav Alster would be the right one for us," a founding member of Beis Medrash Torah Ufillah told me. "We didn't want to open a *shul* and then find a *rav*. It was imperative that the *rav* be a part of the founding of the *shul*."

The first week there were only a few *mispallelim*, and Rav Alster had to bring along some family members to make sure they had a *minyan*. On Friday nights, however, there were 60 people. At the time, they were renting space from another *shul* on Bedford Avenue. Two years later, they would buy a house on Bedford Avenue and build their own beautiful building.

"All of the founders were at the beginning stages of raising their children, and they wanted the *shul's* focus to be on *kevod beis midrash* and *kevod harav*," the founding member explained. "We didn't have an exact vision of what it would look like, and we were pleasantly surprised that it worked out the way it did."

When asked about Rav Alster's greatest effect on the *kehillah*, one of the *mispallelim* replied, "He taught us how to think and what *daas Torah* is. The *kehillah* was looking for direction, and Rav Alster had no problem directing us. You could talk to him about any topic, from business to *shidduchim*."



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Rav Alster was a *pikēiach* who understood people; the fact that he came from a *balebatishe* home meant that he could understand and relate to that mindset. In fact, the founders of the *shul* didn't arrive at their decision blindly. They knew him from the Mesivta of Long Beach and were sure it would be a good fit.

Rav Alster never demanded anything; he told people what he thought, and they accepted it. He never forced an issue. Once, when there was a disagreement about whether to enforce not talking in *shul*, he said, "That's not my style."

Rav Alster raised the members to his level. The way he spoke about the *chashivus* of Torah and *Yiddishkeit* had an automatic *hashpaah* on people. He never called someone Moshe or Leizer; to him, they were "Reb Moshe" or "Reb Leizer."

If not for Rav Alster, many people in the *shul* might not have been comfortable allowing their daughters to marry Lakewood *bachurim* 25 years ago. But no one in Khal Torah Ufillah is the same as he was 25 years ago, with the result that the *kehillah* members' children and grandchildren also turned out differently.

Rav Alster also influenced the way his community gave *tzedakah*. An annual appeal is made for the *aniyei Eretz Yisrael* every year before the *Yomim Nora'im*, and Torah UTefillah raises a considerable sum of money. This isn't because of one or two big donors, but simply because the members

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give more than the average for those in their socioeconomic class.

Everyone I spoke to recalled Rav Alster's "sixth sense." He always seemed to know if someone was troubled. Even years after they discussed a problem with him, Rav Alster remembered his students' concerns. "I remember calling him while I was in *shidduchim* with an issue I was having," a former *talmid* said. "When I called him three years later to invite him to my son's *bris*, he asked me about what we'd discussed."

Another *mispallel* recalled how easy it was to talk to Rav Alster and how comfortable he made you feel. "I was never afraid of being

judged in any way. There was empathy and sometimes *mussar*, but it was never delivered in a high-handed way."

Rav Alster was renowned for his clear thinking and sage advice, and many people who weren't affiliated with his *shul* or *yeshiva* also sought his counsel. "I remember one time after *shivur* seeing him open his phone, and there were 83 missed calls. And it wasn't just the same guy calling repeatedly."

The highlight of the year was the *shul's melaveh malkah*, at which Rav Alster sat with his *mispallelim* rather than at the head table. "Although he was the *rav* and we treated him accordingly, he never looked down on us," said another member of the *shul*. "He wasn't friends with the *oilam*, yet he was part of the *tzibbur*. The high point of the evening was always his *drashah*. In most places, a *melaveh malkah* speech like that would center around the success of the *shul*. But Rav Alster always gave a very strong *mussar shmuss*, pointing out the areas in which we could improve, both as a *kehillah* and as individuals."

But perhaps his greatest achievement was his unique ability to create true *bnei Torah* out of people who were often not likely candidates.

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