Biography

Cared for Every Yid

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affirmed in an interview. “we heard stories, but with him it felt like there was a connection to something big – come closer.’ and he really meant it.”

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For Reb Dovid, 86 at the time of his petirah, was known among his talmidim for his ability to condense his vast knowledge gained as a prime talmid of Harav Shimon Shkopp, z”l, along with his expertise in all of the commonly learned sefarim of Chassidim and Chasidic Rebbe Yudin said.

“He had the ability to transport and bring suvak and the great personalities of American Jewry that we were not exposed to here in America.” Rabbi Yudin said.

“When a day goes by that I don’t think of my rebbi,” Rabbi Weinberger said at the Yeshiva University hakurafor Reb Dovid on Sunday. “He made me into who I am today.”

Elaborating on that theme, Rabbi Weinberger told Hamodia that “He didn’t speak English, he came from a totally different culture. And yet, I don’t recall a rebbi understanding the nuances of the life of an American boy like Reb Dovid.”

Mrs. Sarah Ittel Stein, one of Reb Dovid’s three daughters and a daughter-in-law of Harav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, z”t, the late Reb Dovid’s paternal grandfather, wrote a letter to the Meshiv Meshivim” and I would yell on the phone and asking, ‘Who is it?’”

Mrs. Stein recalled, “and a voice would say, ‘Meir Feinshtein,’ and I would yell across the house, ‘Papa, its Meir Feinshtein.’

He took his work with Ezras Torah, undertaken at the personal urging of Harav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin, z”t, extreme- ly seriously — especially before Yamim Tovim, his daughter said, when he was asked to sign off on huge sums for poor families. “I remember him in the study, reading over the letters

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Haggon Harav Dovid Lifshitz, z’t”: A Rosh Yeshivah Who Cared for Every Yid

In honor of the Suvalker Rav’s 20th Yahrtzeit

“We Are All Suvalkers”

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undisputed Gedol Hador, charged Reb Shimon with the job of reviving Torah in Poland by becoming the head of Yeshivah Shaar HaTorah in Grodna.

Arriving in Grodna shortly after, Reb Shimon found ready ears in the form of Reb Dovid and a small coterie of his friends. The relationship blossomed when shortly after his arrival, regional leaders cordially begged Reb Shimon to consider closing the yeshivah. Reb Dovid and a small number of talmidim were invited to the Rosh Yeshivah’s room to discuss how to keep the kol Torah strong.

They were successful, and Reb Dovid developed a lifelong love for Reb Shimon that did not end even decades after the latter’s passing. And Reb Dovid succeeded in passing on that reverence he had for his rabbino to successive generations of his own talmidim.

“I heard from Mori v’Rabi Rav Shimon, zt’l,” punctuated with a deferential rise from his seat and a tremble in his voice, was a common refrain during his shiur.

In 1926, Reb Shimon suggested that his talmid go to the Mirrer Yeshivah, where Europe’s best talmidim learned. Reb Dovid emerged during that time learning under Harav Leizer Yudel Finkel, zt’l, the Rosh Yeshivah, and Harav Yerucham Leovitz, zt’l, the Mashgiach, as a baby in all the primary Rishonim and Acharonim, which he had learned by heart, as well as a serious man with a refined nature.

In later years, sitting next to Reb Dovid during shiur, Rabbi Weinberger saw him look into Weinberger said. “And it was

He was very excited and he said the entire thing from beginning to the end. It was a long Rashba and he was screaming it out loud.” Rabbi Weinberger said. “And it was all by heart, he was on the wrong page.”

“He seemed to us that he knew the entire Torah by heart. There wasn’t anything that we asked him that he wasn’t completely comfortable with.”

One noted Rosh Yeshivah in the United States who learned with Reb Dovid during those days once said in wonder, “Reb Lishshitz knew the following sefarim: Ketzos Hachoshen, Nesivos Hamishpat, Sheh Shmaatsa and Mesehovey Nesivos — he knew these sefarim like the back of his hand.”

It was Reb Leizer Yudel who suggested Reb Dovid in the 1930s when Harav Yosef Yuselovich, the Rav of Sviluk, came seeking a shidduch for his only daughter, Tziporah Chava. It was understood at the time that her husband would one day take over the prestigious rabbanus of that city. The couple got married in 1933 and settled in Sviluk. The esteem Reb Dovid was held in by the Miz was evident in the fact that when the Mushpiaichel, Reb Yerucham, was niftar in 1936, the hanahalah asked him to travel to Mir to deliver the yeshivah’s kippen on behalf of the talmidim traditionally given at the end of the shivah.

(Throughout the years Reb Dovid was also asked to be mesipid various Gedolim, such as Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt’l, his mechutan and Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivat Torah Vodaath, Harav Moshe Feinstein, zt’l, and Harav Aharon Kotler, zt’l, Rosh Yeshivah of Bais Medrash Govoha in Lakewood — all singular honors.)

The awe Reb Dovid, as all the talmidim, had for Reb Yerucham was astounding.

On a ship in 1941 from Europe to San Francisco — along with Harav Avraham Yaffen, zt’l, Rosh Yeshivah of Novardok, and Harav Moshe Shatzkes, zt’l, the Lomza Rav — was Reb Yerucham’s son.

During the trip, Reb Yerucham’s son’s wife gave birth to a boy, now known as Reb Yerucham Leovitz, who currently lives in Lakewood. When Reb Dovid was honored with krias hashanah and heard the name of his Mishpiaichel, he fainted from hirushah.

Reb Dovid’s shira was niftar in 1936, and Reb Dovid, at the young age of 29, was appointed Reb Chaim Diner as Rav of a city of more than 20,000 Yidden.

Beloved by His Contemporaries

Reb Dovid’s new title remained with him his entire life, through a short-lived stay in Skokie and a half century of teaching in YU. The name “Suvalker Rav” evoked an awe in Gedolim who were familiar with him.

During a visit to Rtsi Brak in the 1970s, Rabbi Weinberger said that he visited the Steipler’s home to purchase a set of Kehillos Yavok. The Steipler, Harav Yaakov Yosef Kanievsky, zt’l, refused to sell the entire set to a young bachur, arguing that he didn’t need more than the volume on the mesechta he was learning. But when he was informed that the bachur before him was a talmid of Reb Dovid, the Steipler backtracked.

“The Suvalker Rav?” he inquired. “I heard from anybody who could — who would — find a heter, it was Reb Dovid.”

A Chassid of the Satmar Rebbe, Harav Yoel Teitelbaum, zt’l, related that he was once one of set of sefarim in Lives to Rabbi Weinberger.

While the Rav — Harav Yoshe Ber Soloveitchek, zt’l, the Rosh Yeshivah — was considered a shaylah and a truthful purveyor of the Brisker mesorah in YU, Reb Dovid’s shira was authentically Litvish, heavy on Rishonim. But the respect the two had for each other was remarkable to watch — such as when an elderly woman who was in the middle of sitting shivah came to Reb Yoshe Ber asking if she were allowed to tend her grandchild’s chasunah.

Go to Reb Dovid, the Rav advised.

“The Rav knew hilchos avuyat!” Reb Yudin exclaimed in amazement. “But the Rav knew that if there was anybody who could — who would — find a heter, it was Reb Dovid.”

The Chassid said the two decided to visit the Rebbe in order to speak in clear Yiddish. They arrived at 8:00 p.m., and remained absorbed in their discussion until midnight.

When eleven of the foremost Roshei Yeshivah in the U.S. issued their landmark ban in 1956 to join an organization with a non-Orthodox component, a decision that reverberates until today, Reb Dovid was among them.

Mrs. Stein remembers clearly waking up early one morning to hear loud sobbing coming from her father’s room. He had just received word that his close friend from the Mir, Harav Leib Malin, zt’l, Rosh Yeshivah of Beis Hatalmid, had been niftar.

“It was the saddest face I ever saw on my father,” she said.

One of Reb Dovid’s closest friends in life was Harav Chaim Shmulevitz, zt’l, the son-in-law of Reb Dovid’s Rosh Yeshivah, Reb Leizer Yudel, and a chavrusa from both Grodna and Mir.

During a trip to Eretz...
Yisrael in 1962, the Lifshitzes were invited for the first night seudah on Rosh Hashanah by Harav Yechezkel Sarna, z”l, Rosh Yeshiva of Chevron, and the second night to eat with Reb Chaim Shmuilevitz, who was then too sick to get out of bed.

Reb Chaim indicated that he wanted Reb Dovid to sit at the head of the table in his place, and to make Kiddush. ( Reb Dovid refused, to Reb Chaim's obvious disappointment.)

A member of the Shmuilevitz family said that when Reb Dovid would come visit Reb Chaim, "it was a Yom Tov in itself."

Harav Shlomo Haberstam, the Rebbe of Rechavim, expressed surprise, and asked Reb Dovid to come to Boro Park to test the talmidim of his yeshivah.

Survival and Tragedy

During his abbreviated stint as Suvalker Rav, Reb Dovid considered himself with strengthening Torah and halachah. There was a nearby army base with many Jewish soldiers and he concerned himself with their well-being. He once even made a Pesach sedar for them before heading home to his own sedar with his family.

Reb Dovid's idyllic existence as a rising star of Poland's and Lithuania's Rabbanim, as he began to build his family with the birth of a daughter, crashed during the September 1939 invasion of Poland.

Entering his home to find out where the wealthy people of the city were hiding, a Nazi discovered a chalaf — a shocher's knife — on the table. He seized it, pressed it against Reb Dovid's throat and threatened, "Der rebbiner velken mir shloch men ha'kashe — we'll shechet the Rabbi in a kosher way."

Although the incident ended peacefully, Reb Dovid realized that it was time to escape from the city with his wife.

During that time a tragic event occurred that left a deep and lasting scar on both of them. On the way out of Suvalk, they heard shots being fired, causing everyone in the vicinity to seek shelter in a nearby forest. In the tumult, Reb Dovid's six-month-old daughter, Rashel, was asked by a talmid to develop it into a well-constructed idea, then repeating it as if that is what the talmid had meant all along. He would then call the fathers of the talmidim to tell him that their sons "said such a beautiful seurah."

A most eagerly awaited event of the year came on Simchas Torah night, when dozens of talmidim came to Reb Dovid's house around the corner from the YU campus to escort him to the yeshivah for havafas. Hundreds of necks craned to watch how Reb Dovid would walk majestically into the hall, to the thunderous strains of “Baruch Eloheinu She’beraamnu Lichvodo,” or a favorite of his, “Travel Yehuas Yaakov."

But what was his initial attraction for American youths — many of whom had come to YU more for its college program — that caused them to throw away their dreams and pursue a full-time career in Torah study?

"He was beautiful," Rabbi Weinberger said simply. "He had an unbelievable hadran panim and he carried himself in a very regal way. I just was attracted to the appearance of something very authentic. ... I was never zocheh to have a grandfather, and there was something about him that inspired in me a feeling that if I had a zeide, that's the kind of zeide I would like to have."

Rabbi Weinberger recalled a year-end bechinos, a written test that took the five dozen bachurim taking it about six hours to complete.

Suddenly they heard Reb Dovid mumbled to himself, his voice lowering each time. "What a helige time this is, what a helige time this is," he repeated many times. As the bachurim looked at him quizzically, Reb Dovid explained that during shirah it is possible that someone's mind would wander. But now during the test, everyone was totally absorbed in Torah. Saying that, in the middle of the bechinos the boys had worked so hard on, Reb Dovid began singing "Vetaheber libeina Yosecha hames." "He was literally crying," Rabbi Weinberger said. "We
were all singing ‘Vehater libnun’.

Knowing that Rabbi Weinberger enjoyed delving into chassidische seforim, Reb Dovid asked him once as they were returning from baking matzos to tell him over a chassidische vort. Rabbi Weinberger recalled telling him something from the Anna Neier.

“I began to speak,” he said, “and he said, ‘Quick, we have to get off the highway; this is not something to talk about during driving.’”

Rabbi Weinberger turned off onto a side street in Manhattan, where Reb Dovid asked him to repeat the Torah. After listening to it again, he grabbed Rabbi Weinberger’s hand and began singing.

“And we sang that niggun over there, on some street in Manhattan,” he says with a laugh.

Rabbi Weinberger admits that he always had a leaning into chassidishe seforim and has long been singing ‘Vetaher libnun’ — his shul is named for the Piacenza Rebbe, Harav Klonimus Kalman Shapiro, Hy”d — and he had been looking for a Rebbe when he found Reb Dovid.

“In Yitzchak Elchanan, he was a Rebbe,” Rabbi Weinberger said. “Not by pedigree — he was a straight Litvak through and through. But in his personality and the warmth, and the way he saw everything in a very positive way, he is the Rebbe that many of our newer students were looking for a Rebbe in that Litvishe way — we found it in him.”

“The fact that he seemed so detached from American culture and, so completely enveloped in kedushah because of the world that he came from, found that to be the most attractive thing. That drew me to him very strongly.”

One aspect of that kedushah was Reb Dovid’s insistence on speaking only Yiddish or Lashon Kodesh during learning or at a Shabbos table. In the 1960s, sensitive to the fact that many of their newer talmidim were not as well-versed in Yiddish, YU began urging maggidim to deliver their shirim in English. Uncomfortable speaking divrei Torah in English, Reb Dovid developed a perfect Lashon Kodesh, in the Ashkenazi havarah, in which he gave his shirim.

“He’s sincerity overcame the generation gap,” Rabbi Yudin says, “and became a bridge to an American youth so foreign to upbringing.”

For Rabbi Yudin, Reb Dovid was more than a mentor for life. Reb Dovid was his mesader kiddushin, sandak at his eldest son’s bris, and trained him in for rabbinus. When he had difficulties during his initial years in Far Lakes, Reb Dovid was there to help.

“During all that time,” Rabbi Yudin says, “he was there for me.”

When Rabbi Yudin became a chassan, Reb Dovid called his kapote to wish her mazel tov and ask her about her furniture purchases. “It meant the world to her,” Rabbi Yudin marvels.

He said that when it came to select a name for his shul, aware that there was a large Reform temple in the city, Reb Dovid insisted that the name include the word “Torah” in it so that it should be clear where he belonged. (He chose “Shomrei Torah.”)

During the annual tests that Reb Dovid gave, where the talmidim would write answers to oral questions the Rosh Yeshivah asked, one of the first questions he would invariably ask was, “Did everybody eat?” If not, he would send the bachur out to go eat.

When meeting a former talmid, the first thing was a “Shalom aleichem,” followed in rapid succession by “Vu halstvu in lernen — how are you learning?”

When greeting someone he would grasp the person’s hand in both of his own, make eye contact, always making sure he was wearing his kapote when someone came to his home. His regal bearing was commented upon even by their non-Jewish postal deliveryman, who would say, “When Rabbi Lifshitz goes by it’s a prince walking by.”

Reb Dovid’s method of reproof was by emphasizing the positive, rather than focusing on the negative. “He was the type of person who, if he were at a chasunah and there was inappropriate dancing, he would start a new circle of appropriate dancing,” Rabbi Yudin said. “He did things in a positive way by being proactive instead of simply protesting.”

Rabbi Dovid’s three daughters — Mrs. Shulamis Kamenetsky and Mrs. Chaya Waxman, both of Veracruz, and Mrs. Sara Ittel Stein of Cleveland — recall him as a very warm and emotional family man who would learn Chumash with them every Shabbos.

As his daughters left the house to begin their own families, Reb Dovid would mention them on Friday night, “Ich bentch der fun veten — I bless this daughter from afar.”

Although 20 years have passed since his petirah on 9 Tamzuz, 1993, organizers and family members who attended the multiple yahrzeit events on Sunday and Monday were surprised at the hundreds of people who turned out to honor him. Years after they left his shior, the image of the smiling Reb Dovid and his warmth remained with them, infusing them with his enthusiasm for Torah.

“The rebbe is still with us,” one participant summed up the feeling that permeated the hall.

Others who prided themselves to call Reb Dovid their rebbe include Harav Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky, tz”l, the celebrated Rosh Yeshivas of Ner Yissroel in Baltimore, whose notes were used to publish one of the volumes of Chiddushei Rav Dovid Lifshitz, and, ybd”t, Harav Chaim Dov Keller, current Rosh Yeshivah of Telshe in Chicago.

“I learned in his shior for one year,” Harav Keller wrote in an appreciation based on his hesped at Reb Dovid’s levayah, “yet I gained from him a derech in learning for my whole life, and I remained, as did many, a talmid my entire life.”