Rav Dovid Lifshitz z’t’l

The Suvalker Rov and Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon
On His 20th Yahrtzeit, 9 Tammuz

In the summer of 1993, Klal Yisroel mourned the passing of Rav Dovid Lifshitz, a distinguished, RoshYeshiva, Rov and mashpia who had served for years one of the Roshei Yeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon and had a profound impact on the lives of countless talmidim. In his heiper for Rav Dovid, Rav Chaim Scim, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Telzer Yeshiva of Cleveland, related that while he had known Rav Dovid for many years as a brilliant talmid chachom and outstanding mashpia, he had learned something new during Rav Dovid’s final illness. During that time, he had seen how attached and devoted Rav Dovid’s students were to him. The bond between rebbe and talmidim was such a strong one that it was clear that their very souls were linked. One talmid, who had been at Rav Dovid’s side virtually throughout his final illness, even accompanied the amon to Eretz Yisroel, along with Rav Dovid’s daughter and son-in-law. This, Rav Chaim asserted, was a testimony to Rav Dovid’s own intense devotion to his talmidim. Just as Rav Dovid poured his own heart and soul into each and every one of his students, the students responded in kind, their own devotion mirrored his. Rav Dovid Lifshitz was a brilliant Torah scholar and an incredibly successful Rebbi in kind; their own devotion mirrored his.

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As a child, Dovid Abraham

Rav Dovid Shimon Shkop, the legendary rosh yeshivah of Yeshivas Shaar HaTorah in Grodno. Rav Dovid Shimon arrived in Grodno around this time, following the capture of Grodno by the forces of gospodi Torah in the year 5680 (1920), at which he was asked to leave the yeshiva of the town of Breinsk, where he had been serving for over a decade, and take the helm of the yeshiva in Grodno. After Rav Shimon’s arrival, the upheaval caused by the Russo-Polish War of 1919 and 1920 had a devastating effect on the yeshiva, almost closing it altogether. By Sukkos of the year 5681 (late 1920), only Rav Dovid and a few other bochurim were left in the yeshiva. But before long, Rav Shimon was able to revive the yeshiva, and it served once again as a vibrant center of Torah learning.

Rav Dovid spent five years learning in Shaar HaTorah, years that had a profound effect on him that lasted for the rest of his life. Throughout his life, whenever Rav Dovid quoted Rav Shimon Shkop, he would refer to him as “mori verahi - my master and teacher.” Rav Dovid imbued his rebbe’s To- rah, and along with it, he absorbed Rav Shimi- mon’s example of the relationship a rebbe should have with his talmidim: his patience, his dedication, and the formation of a life-long bond with every talmid.

When Rav Dovid was eighteen years old, Rav Shimon urged him to follow in the footsteps of many of the older talmidim in the yeshiva, who had left to learn in the great Yeshiva of Mir. In Mir, as in Grodno, Rav Dovid was known as a gifted iluy and a gifted member of the yeshiva’s student body. His memory was phenomenal, and it was known that he was extraordinarily well-versed in all of the classic seforim studied in yeshivos, such as the Ketzov Hachoshen, the Nesivos Hamischpat, and Chiddushei Reb Aviga Eiger. His peers noted that he was always serious, and that he conducted himself in a manner befitting a much older talmid chachom. Rav Dovid developed close relationships with both the Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel z’t’l, and the yeshiva’s renowned mashgiach, Rav Yeru- chaim Levowitz. He maintained his connec- tion with Rav Shimon Shkop and made sure to greet his rebbe and absorb the words of Torah every time he returned to his parents home in Grodno.

The Suvalker Rov

When Rav Dovid was 24 years old, the rov of the town of Suvalk, Rav Yosef Yosef- owitz, asked Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel to help him find a shidduch for his only daugh- ter, Tzipporah Chava. In those days, it was almost rare for a young man at the age of 24 to get married, especially in the Mis- rer Yeshiva, but the Rosh Yeshiva felt that Rav Dovid would be a fitting match for the Suvalker Rov’s daughter, and he did not hesitate to suggest the shidduch. The two were married in Cheshvan of the year 5693 (1933), at a wedding attended by many of the most illustrious rabbinim of Poland at the time.

Rav Dovid and his new wife settled in her hometown of Suvalk, where he assisted his father-in-law in managing his rabbinic responsibilities. Suvalk was actually a large city, home to a kehillah of over 10,000 Jews. The town was also called upon to see to it that they were supplied with food that was kosher for Pesach, and the Seder it- self was held for a group of several hundred soldiers in a large hall, led by Rav Dovid himself and attended by a number of import- ant communal figures.

Despite his young age, Rav Dovid was also called upon to adjudicate numerous communi- cations that his father-in-law had found- ing from outside Suvalk, a task that he handled with success.

Dedication Under Fire

When World War Two broke out in September, 1939, the Jews of Suvalk were among the first to suffer - and Rav Dovid’s acts of dedication to his kehilah rose to an entirely new level. As war broke out, Ger- man planes appeared in the skies overhead and began raining bombs on the city of Su- valk. Rav Dovid’s immediate response was to hurried through the ruins of destruction in order to free any Jews who had been impris- oned in the local jail, lest they be harmed by the shelling.

Suvalk briefly fell into Russian hands, but in accordance with the terms of the treaty between Germany and Russia (the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact), it was quickly handed over to Germany. The Nazis entered Suvalk on Simchas Torah of that year, and Rav Dovid was immediately summoned to appear before the Gestapo. A delegation of important members of the community went with him to meet the German officials, who treated the Jews with derision and contempt. It was not long before the Germans issued an edict prohibiting shechitah in the city. Their response was vicious: Pressing the knife against Rav Dovid’s throat, a soldier demanded that all the shechitah knives in the city be handed over immediately. Then the Nazis demanded a list of all the wealthy Jews in town, as well as the homes of any Jew who owned a radio. Rav Dovid managed to keep his wits about him and claimed that all the affluent
Jews had already escaped, and he had no way of knowing who owned a radio.

Escape from the Nazis

The situation quickly went from bad to worse, as the next Nazi decree called for all the shuls and batei medrash in the town to be closed immediately. Before long, a decree of expulsion was issued against all the Jews of Suwałk. The community leaders begged for mercy, explaining to the Nazis that they had nothing to fear, and that they, along with the Russians and Lithuania were sealed to them. But their pleas were met with cruel indifference. Ultimately, the community was granted a two-week reprieve in order to devise a plan for remittance.

Reb Dovid leapt into action. Traveling to the Russian border, he obtained permission to cross the border and meet with local officials. He pleaded for his fellow Jews to be granted sanctuary and was told that his request would be passed on to Moscow. No response was ever received. A similar attempt to meet with Lithuanian officials was rebuffed, when Reb Dovid and his delegation were not even allowed to cross the border. Nevertheless, the Jews on the other side of the border started to communicate to their brethren in distress that they should try to cross over into Lithuania illegally, and there was hope that they would be allowed to remain once they were there.

Reb Dovid took a strong interest in his community, but he did send his wife, his widowed mother-in-law, and his two children, a five-year-old girl and a baby, across the border along with a group of other Jewish refugees. Unfortunately, at this point tragedy struck the family. During the clandestine border crossing, the baby began to cry and the border guards opened fire. Reb Dovid’s five-month-old daughter was tragically killed by the gunfire, and his wife and mother-in-law were captured by the Lithuanian police and returned to the Germans. Reb Dovid’s older daughter was separated from her mother and grandmother and somehow ended up in Kalvarija, a Lithuanian city that was home to 1000 Jews.

After this incident, Reb Dovid was finally persuaded to leave Suwalk and find his missing daughter, whose whereabouts were then unknown to him. Along with his wife and mother-in-law, Reb Dovid crossed the border and was reunited with his daughter. He continued to work tirelessly for the sake of the Jews of Suwałk. About 3000 Jews were continued to work tirelessly for the sake of the Jews of Suwałk. About 3000 Jews were continued to work tirelessly for the sake of the Jews of Suwałk. About 3000 Jews were

He was also highly respected by American rabbonim, who recognized him as a distinguished rabbanim and served as the same respect as the veteran members of the Agudas Harabonim. In 1942, Reb Dovid Lifshitz was invited to serve as the rosh yeshivah of Beis Medrash LeTorah in Chicago, an offer that he accepted.

A Sought-After Meshpaha

In Chicago, Reb Dovid was highly respected by the various rabbonim of the city, and he became a beloved and admired meshpaha and marbitz Torah in the yeshiva. Reb Dovid’s reputation traveled across the country, and he soon received two offers of other positions, each of them in New York. One was extended by Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz z”l, who invited Reb Dovid to serve as a naggid shiar in Meziv Torah Vodaas, while the other came from Dr. Samuel Belkin of Yeshivas Rabbiine Yitzchok Ekonson, who offered Reb Dovid a prominent position in that institution. Reb Dovid chose to accept the position at RIETS. He especially felt that he could contribute to RIETS’s stated goal of producing rabbonim that would serve in communities throughout the country. Indeed, his experience as both a practicing rov and his years learning in the great yeshivos of Grodno and Mir made him eminently suited for the task.

Thus, in 1944 Reb Dovid returned to New York and settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. But Kotler z”l remarked at the time that Reb Dovid did not have the right to resign from his position, since the Jewish world needed him. After the other members of the presidium passed away, Reb Dovid also gave up his position so that Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l could serve in his place. Reb Dovid held the title of honorary president for the rest of his life.

Reb Dovid had a deep, abiding love for Eretz Yisroel, and he played a fundamental role in the political sphere of the nascent State of Israel. Shortly after the State was founded, Reb Dovid traveled to Eretz Yisroel and was instrumental in assembling the “religious front” that was included in the first Knesset.

For many years, Reb Dovid served as the vice president of Efras Torah, the tzedokah organization founded in 1915. In 1976, Reb Dovid was appointed the president of the organization; it was a position he held until his passing 17 years later. During this time, he collected thousands of dollars on behalf of impoverished Jews everywhere, particularly the Torah scholars of Eretz Yisroel.

A Devoted Rebbe

Two years before his passing, Reb Dovid was the guest of honor at the 75th anniversary banquet of Efras Torah. The banquet was attended by a large number of his talmidim, and Reb Dovid took a personal interest in each one, inquiring about his learning and greeting each with visible warmth and affection. It was clear to everyone present that Reb Dovid had heeded Chazal’s injunction to “establish many students.” Indeed, Reb Dovid could be credited with “establishing” thousands of students, and taking a personal interest in each of them.

Reb Dovid was always willing to take the time to explain any concept repeatedly in his shiurim until his students had grasped it. And his concern for his students and their well-being extended far beyond their years under his direct tutelage; he continued taking an interest in their lives long after they had left the yeshiva. Even years after a student had learned under him, Reb Dovid would remember the first family by name.

Reb Dovid was once told that one of his talmidim was not conducting himself in a proper way. Even though this talmid had not completely left the fold, Reb Dovid was moved to tears. He immediately began searching for a way to influence the talmid, and he had no rest until he had managed to do so.

Upon joining the faculty of RIETS, Reb Dovid insisted on living in the yeshiva’s neighborhood. He was committed not only to teaching his students during the time they spent with him in his shiar, but also teaching by example throughout the year. A large room was open to students at all hours, every day of the week. Especially joyous were special days such as Purim when the talmidim would come to his house to rejoice and hear beautiful words of Torah that exuded joy and set the tone for the day. The love that he radiated to his talmidim was one that was tangible and amazingly bridged the gap between the European born and educated Yidish speaking rabbi with the wholly American English speaking talmidim.

Reb Dovid also davened every day in the yeshiva and his devotion to tefillah, served as a source of inspiration to all that observed him. Especially moving was the way he looked on Yom Kippur, dressed completely in white, the holiness of the day etched on his face. Those that merited hearing Rav Dovid emotionally intone the Avina Malkeinu werdenrich, and who would never for- get it. Indeed his very presence in the RIETS bais medrash lent it an aura of greatness.

Reb Dovid sought to encourage his students who had the ability, to enter the fields of Torah and learning. But he remained close even with those who chose other professions, and he continued to derive pride and pleasure from their accomplishments.

Promoter of Peace

Reb Dovid was known for his commitment to the ideal of sholom, peace. He was beloved by many people and had many close friends. On every possible occasion, Reb Dovid warned others to refrain from using hurtful or demeaning words. His approach was always to avoid confrontation and to maintain peaceful coexistence with others; he eschewed machlokes of any sort. Even in his capacity as a member of the Agudas Harabonim, an organization whose goal was to defend Yiddishkeit from all breaches or distortions of tradition, Reb Dovid somehow always found a way to achieve that goal without rancor or discord.

Once, Reb Dovid organized a march of yeshiva students in Chicago, in an effort to promote Shabbos observance and convince Jewish storeowners to close their establishments on Shabbos. At first, some objected to the plan, claiming that no benefit could come from it, but Reb Dovid was determined to see it through. “Even if one store closes its doors, it will be worth it,” he declared. Ultimately, Reb Dovid’s campaign was successful in influencing many business owners. But in all of Reb Dovid’s struggles against chilul Shabbos, he remained constantly pleasant and avoided confrontation or hostility. As a result, his pleas for shemiras Shabbos were much more persuasive.

Reb Dovid passed away on the ninth of Tammuz, 5753 (1993) and was deeply mourned by his talmidim. And his concern for his students and their well-being extended far beyond their years under his direct tutelage; he continued taking an interest in their lives long after they had left the yeshiva. Even years after a student had learned under him, Reb Dovid would remember the first family by name.

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