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RAV YISROEL BELSKY, ZT"l
5698—5776 1938—2016

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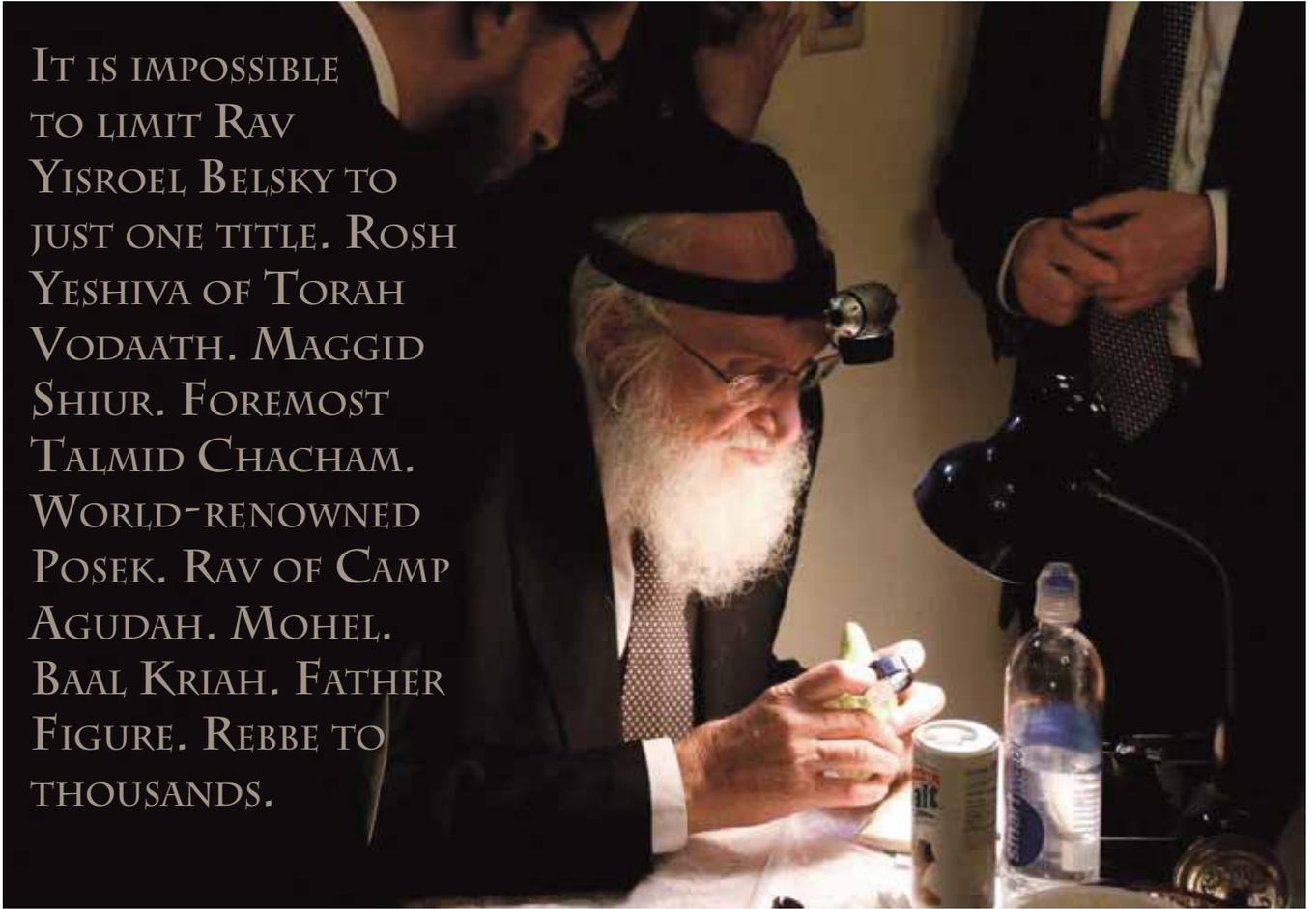
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IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LIMIT RAV YISROEL BELSKY TO JUST ONE TITLE. ROSH YESHIVA OF TORAH VODAATH. MAGGID SHIUR. FOREMOST TALMID CHACHAM. WORLD-RENOWNED POSEK. RAV OF CAMP AGUDAH. MOHEL. BAAL KRIAH. FATHER FIGURE. REBBE TO THOUSANDS.



I had the zechus of walking Reb Berel Belsky, father of Rav Yisroel, home from shul during the last years of his life. Although he lived down the block from his Kensington shul, the walk took quite a while. Reb Berel always had a vort to share and was dismayed when he couldn't remember a maamar of Chazal word for word.

In his unassuming way, he once asked, "Did you ever hear of my son Reb Yisroel?" I assured him I had, and took the opportunity to ask him how he had merited such a special son.

"When I raised him," Reb Berel said, "I didn't want him to be a doctor or a lawyer, just a talmid chacham. And I davened a lot."

Several years after Reb Berel's passing, I met Rav Yisroel Belsky at a melaveh malkah. I recounted my relationship with his father

and what his father had said. With tears in his eyes, he told me "Thank you for taking care of my father. And thank you for telling that to me."

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

It is impossible to limit Rav Yisroel Belsky to just one title. Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaath. Maggid Shiur. Foremost talmid chacham. World-renowned Posek. Rav of Camp Agudah. Mohel. Baal Kriah. Father Figure. Rebbe to thousands. Yet hardly anyone would have predicted it.

Rav Belsky's legacy can be traced to 1850s America, when Rav Pinchas Aron Bruder was sent from Hungary by the Shinever Rebbe to serve as a *shochet* in the New World. Rav

BY NESANEL GANTZ

AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING GADOL

Pinchas Aron had hesitated at first: There was little in the way of Jewish infrastructure at the time, and America was no place to raise a Jewish family.

The Shinever Rebbe understood. He gave the Bruders a *brachah*: “*Ich bin mavtiach dir oif der kinder!*”

Hashem kept the Rebbe’s promise. One of Rav Pinchas Aron’s daughters married Rav Moshe Weberman. Their daughter Blima married Rav Binyamin Wilhelm, future founder of Torah Vodaath.

Rav Binyamin had arrived in America at the turn of the 20th century on a boat from Poland, a fatherless Alexander *chasid*. His friends had written to him that there was indeed Torah in America, and he made his way across the Atlantic. With *mesiras nefesh* and against all odds, in a story that could fill several volumes, Rav Binyamin convinced 60 couples to send him their children, and Torah Vodaath was born.

One of those children was five-year-old Berel Belsky. Little Berel’s father, Yisroel, was a successful businessman with a textile company in Manhattan, a rare wealthy *shomer Shabbos*. He had donated \$1,000, a large sum in those days, toward the founding of Torah Vodaath.

After learning in Europe for three years, Berel, now a *bachur*, returned to the US, where he married Rav Binyamin Wilhelm’s daughter Chana, and they raised six daughters and three sons with *mesiras nefesh* for Hashem and His Torah.

Like his father, Rav Berel was a partner in a successful textile business. At one point, the partners decided they wanted to keep the business open on Shabbos to maximize profits. When he could not convince them otherwise, Rav Berel forfeited his shares in the business. The family was never the same financially, but being a partner in *chillul Shabbos* was not an option.

“One time,” a grandson recounts, “my grandfather walked into an Agudah meeting where they were discussing how to help Russian Jewry. Rav Berel announced that he was donating \$3,000. Some of the attendees knew him personally and looked incredulous—they knew he had recently sold his car to help support Russian Jews! He told them that on that morning he and his wife had resolved to do something more. Rebbetzin Chana took off her diamond ring and asked her husband to sell it. He took it to the

pawn shop, got \$3,000, and donated it to help Russian *Yidden*.” It was into this household that Yisroel Belsky was born, on the 25th of Av 5698 (August 22, 1938).

Even in his early years, the young Yisroel Belsky demonstrated rare character. As a teenage camp counselor, a camper once hurt him deeply. He went into the forest to cry. Then he suddenly thought to himself, “Why am I crying over such a petty thing? The *tzaar* of the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for the *Beis Hamikdash* is so much larger!” So he channeled his tears to cry for the *churban*.

It was rumored that Rav Belsky achieved a perfect SAT score (an extreme rarity even today) on the college entrance exam. Suspicious, the college board asked him to retake the test under closer monitoring—and were stunned to find that he had received a perfect score yet again. He was awarded a full scholarship to college.

Rav Belsky requested a year’s deferment to focus on Talmudic studies. The board decided to extend him the right to the scholarship. When he requested a second year, they gave him an ultimatum: Take the scholarship, or leave it.



Rav Belsky with Rav Finkel

He left it.

Rav Belsky’s genius was well-known, but he never used his abilities as an excuse to stop learning. Reb Berel was known to tell his son, “A genius is no big deal—Einstein was a genius. The question is what you do with it.”

Once, he was honored with *nesius* by a Russian *kehillah* in New York. At the dinner, Rav Belsky got up to deliver his keynote address—in flawless Russian, a shock to all present. He explained that he had taught himself Russian from a book. And the *kehillah* felt special.

ROSH YESHIVAH

“I don’t think there was another person who lived Torah Vodaath for 78 years like Rav Belsky,” says Rabbi Yitzchok



Rav Belsky with Bluzhever Rebbe



Rav Belsky shaking the hand of his son-in-law, Sholomo Yehudah Rechnitz

Gottdiener, Torah Vodaath's executive director. "His father was of the first *talmidim*. His *bris* probably took place in *yeshivah*."

He received *smichah* from Torah Vodaath, as well as from Rav Moshe Feinstein. He had been assisting Rav Moshe on a *teshuvah*. Rav Moshe was so impressed that after asking him a set of other questions he wrote him *smichah* on the spot.

One week, a Modern Orthodox fellow came to the *yeshivah*, Rabbi Gottdiener remembers. The staff identified him as a visitor from Sydney, Australia.

"I finally got in touch with him, and he explained why he had come to the *yeshivah*. He said he had been a *talmid* of Rav Belsky, 50 years ago. He was in town for a wedding and decided to come by. 'Rav Belsky was the *rebbe* who put me on my feet,' he told me. 'I had to come give my *rebbe* the *kavod*.' Later, we found copies of correspondence between him and Rav Belsky for *ten years* after he had left *yeshivah*, full of encouragement and support."

One *bachur* became a mechanic after graduating high school and did not continue on to *beis midrash*. For two years

straight, Rav Belsky called him every single Erev Shabbos: "Nu, when are you coming to me for a *Shabbos seudah*?"

Rav Belsky visited Pre-1A classrooms with the same enthusiasm as he did a *beis midrash shiur*. The seventh and eighth-graders were on the same floor as his office, and he learned with them often. He was a longtime 12th-grade *rebbe* before only recently switching to deliver the *Yoreh Dei'ah shiur*, the highest *shiur* in *yeshivah*.

For two months out of the year, Rav Belsky could be found at Camp Agudah. He had attended since childhood, staying on as counselor, head counselor, and eventually learning director. After the passing of Reb Yaakov Teitelbaum, Rav Belsky became the de facto *rav* of camp. His position was finally made official eight years ago, a mere formality.

"Rav Belsky always helped, if you wanted him involved," says Rabbi Meir Frischman, Camp Agudah's director. "He was involved in all the *kashrus* in the kitchen. Of course, all the *sh'eilos* in camp went to him. If he felt the learning wasn't enough, he'd get involved. He wanted the counselors to have their own special *shiurim*."

Rav Belsky's nature walks were legendary. Every Motzaei Tishah B'Av and Shivah Assar B'Tamuz, he would walk around the camp road, and he and the campers would sing uplifting songs as he pointed out stars and constellations. If it was a cloudy night, they walked to the Neversink reservoir where there was nothing to block the sky.

EVERY BACHUR

Rav Elya Katz, *menahel* of the Torah Vodaath *beis midrash*, spoke with great emotion about this giant in *chinuch*.

"His *yesod* in *chinuch* was that every *bachur* has a *maaleh*," Rav Katz says. "The reason a *bachur* does not succeed is because he does not feel *chashivus* about himself. If you can elevate his self-esteem, he feels as if he has what to work for. That was his *mehalech*."

"He had such belief in his *talmidim*," Rabbi Gottdiener says. "He said that if you are a *rebbe*, you have to believe in every single *talmid*. A failure is by the *rebbe*, not by the *talmid*. If *talmidim* did something wrong, it wasn't *shayach* for him to not defend them, not because he was naive, but because he had a tremendous love for a *talmid*."

Several years ago, a triumvirate of *roshei yeshivah* was established at Torah Vodaath, consisting of Rav Belsky, and *ybdl*'c Rav Yosef Savitsky and Rav Yisroel Reisman.

"Rav Belsky was a leader," Rabbi Gottdiener says. "He never fired a person. Rav Belsky would go out of his way to convince the person to leave of his own volition. The growth of the *yeshivah* over the last few years was unparalleled, and yet with tremendous *shalom*. That isn't easy."

The executive director rarely involved Rav Belsky in fundraising, but he took financial obligations upon himself anyway. When *rebbeim* retired with severance packages, Rav Belsky would raise another \$50,000-100,000 beyond the *yeshivah*'s contractual obligations, so that

no one left with bitterness.

His care for every Jew was legendary. Once, he dealt with a difficult divorce case. The husband didn't want to give a *get*, and Rav Belsky promised he would not leave the room until the young lady was free to remarry.

It hurt him physically to have to tell people "no." He told Rabbi Gottdiener, "If someone wanted to do me a favor, they would build a pole from my room to the street, so I could get away from the people. It's very hard for me to tell people I can't help them."

Four years ago, in February 2012, the Torah world was thrust into turmoil as Rav Belsky was rushed to the hospital. The name Chaim was added, and he remained bedridden for nearly three months. Then he miraculously recov-



Rabbi Yitzchok Gottdiener with Rav Belsky



Rejoicing at a hachnasas sefer Torah

ered. Through the *tefillos* of *klal Yisrael*, Rav Chaim Yisroel Belsky was with us—four more years to the day.

"Rav Belsky deserves endless respect for everything he has done for *klal Yisrael*," Rabbi Gottdiener says. "That includes his tremendous accomplishment in restoring Torah Vodaath, the mother of American *yeshivos*, to its crowning glory."

How will the *yeshivah* move forward now?

"One thing I can tell you is that Torah Vodaath is not a new *mosad*," Rabbi Gottdiener says. "It is a *mosad* with a long, rich history and *zechus avos*. Rav Belsky cared about the *yeshivah* so much, he will do all he can in the next world to help it thrive." ●

"They don't know us personally but they are true partners in our Torah."

RAV AHRON JUNGERMAN,
ROSH HAKOLLEL
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RAV YISROEL REISMAN IS A ROSH YESHIVAH IN YESHIVA TORAH VODAATH. WE REACHED HIM WHILE HE WAS STILL IN ERETZ YISRAEL AFTER RAV BELSKY'S LEVAYAH.

Rav Belsky, Rav Savitsky, Rav Reisman and Rav Katz



When did you first come to Torah Vodaath?

I've been in Torah Vodaath all my life. I met Rav Belsky the first time when I was 16. That was in September of 1973. I actually was in Rav Meir Weinberg's *shiur*, and they had rooms right next to each other, the doors touched, and they would talk in learning; whenever we had *chazarah* or recess they would stand together. That's why Rav Meir Weinberg was one of the *maspidim*.

You know the whole story of the scholarship he got—they told it at the *levayah*: He used to keep it in his drawer when he was a 12th grade *rebbe* and he used to wave it for the *talmidim* and show them what he had. In 12th grade he graduated Torah Vodaath, got a full state scholarship for college, deferred it for a year, and there was no deferring it for a second year. The way they said the story at the *levayah*, he said, "Okay, he's not going to take it." And they made a special exception for him to allow second year of Talmudic college. He was a very brilliant person.

You learned "by" him?

I was never in his class.

He was a very powerful personality as a *mashpia* in *yeshiva*, even then. I flew with him to Antwerp 25 years ago and I was shocked how everyone in Antwerp knew him. Rav Kreiswirth gave him tremendous *kavod* then.

When you became rosh yeshiva, did your interaction with Rav Belsky change?

It stayed the same. I deferred to him on everything. Everybody did.

I'm sure on his part he was giving you kavod.

Eh. He knew I was *mechabed* him. We had a lot of interaction over the years. He knew I was *mechabed* him and I told him I think we should follow your opinion. I didn't want to disagree with him and I think he had a good handle on things. He trusted his *talmidim*; he always felt they were perfect and good.

I mentioned in my *hesped* that he had a tremendous *ahavas hatalmidim*. He would say: My *talmidim*—they all come to *Minchah*. In camp: They all come to *Shacharis*. I'd say, "*Rebbe*, it's not quite that way." He'd say, "What are you talking about?" If he'd take a lie detector test, he really believed it.

Three months ago, he spoke at a Shabbos retreat held in a hotel for Torah Vodaath *rebbeim*. He spoke about being a *rebbe*. About believing in your *talmidim*, never giving up on the smaller ones. He fought for the underdog and he got into controversies. Most of the time it was because his heart went out to somebody and he defended the person.

On the plane here [to Israel], there was somebody on the plane whom I know. I asked him, "Why are you coming?" He said for the *levayah*. I said, "Really? Why are you going to the *levayah*?"

He said, "When I came from LA, I was a *talmid* in Torah

BY RAV YISROEL REISMAN

A ROSH YESHIVAH REMEMBERS
THE ROSH YESHIVAH



The funeral

Temimah, not in Torah Vodaath. I didn't have a place to sleep. I went to Rav Belsky and he put me in a room together with his son Avrohom and I slept there for three months until I found my own place."

In his house, at the Shabbos *seudos*, there were always many, many people there. Many *bachurim* would come all the time for Shabbos. He had a gigantic table.

When did he have time to learn on his own? He was always busy with the public.

He gave a Daf Yomi *shiur* lunchtime; that was his *chazarah*.

Did he have a specific *mehalech halimud*?

He wasn't a *mepalpel*. It was like Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky's *shiur*. He spoke out what he had to speak out, but his style was very *glatt*, very straight. He gave *shiurim* on *shechitah* and *treifos*. Those were mostly just cases, *halachah* mostly. He gave a *Yoreh Dei'ah shiur* twice a week.

His schedule all the years: He was in *yeshivah* very early. He *davened Shacharis*, gave a *halachah shiur*, and then learned first *seider*. Lunch in Torah Vodaath was only one hour. During lunch he gave a Daf Yomi *shiur*, and then was second *seider*, when he gave *shiur* in *Yoreh Dei'ah*. He had *dinei Torah* in the afternoon; you walked into his room, you never knew what you'd find. You could find people screaming at each other, you could find a divorce.

His *yedios* were incredible.

Somebody once mentioned a carnival—maybe the boys in elementary school were having a carnival—and he turned to someone and said, "Do you know what a carnival means?" No one knew what he was talking about. He said, "*Carn* comes from carnivorous, something that eats meat. *Val* is like valedictorian, goodbye. Goodbye meat. The Catholics wouldn't have meat the whole Lent. They would have one '*seudah mafsekes*' where they would say goodbye to the meat." I think he meant to chuckle at the *avodah zarah*; now the boys have water balloons and shaving cream for their carnival.

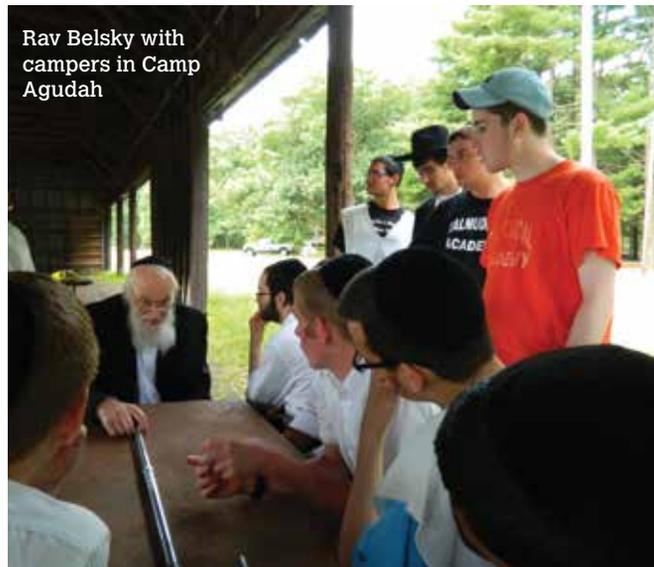
His son just got on the plane so I told him I learned from your father about power naps. He didn't sleep too much. So he used to put his head down and wake up ten minutes later refreshed without an alarm clock. Before he gave the *Yoreh Dei'ah shiur*, he went to his room and had his power nap.

How did he deal with *bachurim* who were not doing well?

With *ahavah*. Always with *ahavah*. He saw no fault in them.

He worked with *bachurim* individually?

He worked with difficulties. I got a call from America from a *chashuve* person. He said he hadn't ever cried at a *hesped* but he cried when I spoke about Rav Belsky's *ahavah*. He said he had a daughter who was difficult during her teenage years. Rabbi Belsky spent hours talking to her. Today she has a regular *Yiddishe* family.



Rav Belsky with campers in Camp Agudah

It boggles the mind how many people he helped.

I once had someone in my house. He said, “I have to go; it’s 12.” “Where are you going? It’s midnight.” He said, “Rav Belsky gave me a 12:30 appointment.” This was someone who was separated from his wife, and Rav Belsky was trying to be *mesader* things.

Did you ever have a *chavrusah* shaft with him?

No.

But you spoke in learning?

Very often. When I learned astronomy, *kiddush hachodesh*, I’d go to his office and ask him my problems. I mentioned last night that I asked him about two particularly difficult *perakim* in *kiddush hachodesh* in the Rambam. I was very disturbed. He told me that when he learned it, he went out and got an explanation of Plato’s astronomy and he hid it in the bathroom.

He used to take the boys out to the reservoir in camp, on a moonless night, usually Rosh Chodesh Av, and explain it to them. I once asked him how the ancients could tell time by looking at the sky. He explained to me: “You see the North Star and the Big Dipper? It goes around it like a clock.”

He once went to the reservoir and told the boys that one of the planets was unusual; he had never seen it the way it was. The next day one boy called the planetarium; it was *takkeh* true.

He wanted to make this connection with *bachurim lav davka* through Torah?

It was all Torah. He never spoke about *yedios* for the sake of *yedios*.

It wasn’t usually *hashkafah*. It usually had to do with *halachah*. Everything connected.

I once was learning before *Shacharis*, and I asked him what *yayin chazak* means. Why was their wine more alcoholic than

ours? He laughed. He said it wasn’t more alcoholic. It was just thicker because the Gemara says that because they wanted to get as much juice out of the grapes as possible, they’d squeeze it very hard; it was just syrupy.

Now they have *yayin kal* that is 3.5% alcohol. *Chazal* never spoke about percentages. It was his *einfall* [idea] that the *yayin kal* was fine for *Kiddush*. He said wine can never naturally turn to more than 14% alcohol because the microbes that produce the alcohol die when it is 14%. So even if the 3.5% alcohol wine is considered *mazug* [diluted], obviously a quarter is wine [and therefore still good for *Kiddush*].

How did he manage to work for the OU and still be *rosh yeshivah*?

He only went on Thursday. He usually took a few *talmidim* with him.

People were always trying to see him.

But not in the mornings. In the mornings he wasn’t in the *velt*, except for emergencies. Ninety percent of the mornings were *kodesh* to the *yeshivah*.

Any other personal *hanhagos* of his you’d like to share?

He had a couch in his house, and his son said they never once saw him sitting on the sofa. He was always at the table learning, at the *shtender* learning. He didn’t know how to relax. No idea. He was always learning and accomplishing.

His house was wide open.

His children mentioned at the *levayah* that although he had tremendous *kocha d’heteira* [leniency], when it came to Shabbos he was *farkert* [just the opposite]. He was very *shtark* with *kedushas Shabbos*.

The children were singing by his bedside in the last days. It was very touching.

He had no airs about him. He didn’t wear a long *rekel* during the week until four years ago, after his illness. He would wear a short jacket and down hat during the week.

Any final message about him?

Three messages. One is *ahavas hatalmidim*. The second is to work with the *shvacher talmidim*, not only the strong ones, which is today’s style. And the third is to want to be *koneh yedios haTorah*. He had diagrams, pictures of the *keilim* of *Maseches Keilim*. He never learned it in first *sefer*. He learned it *bein hasedarim*. But when he learned it, he had drawings of it. In *Melachim*, there’s a description of a palace of Shlomo Hamelech. I looked everywhere for a picture of it and could never find one. Rav Belsky had drawn a diagram of it. In *Melachim*, you have a discussion of two pillars called *Yachin U’Boaz*. I couldn’t find a diagram of them anywhere. He had an intricate drawing of them.



Rav Belsky posing with campers in Camp Agudah

RABBI DUVI FRISCHMAN, DIRECTOR OF THE MASMIDIM PROGRAM OF CAMP AGUDAH, REFLECTS ON RAV BELSKY'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE CAMP AND DEDICATION TO THE CAMPERS

The Masmidim program of Camp Agudah consists of 100-150 seriously minded boys, where the focal point of the summer is Torah learning. Rav Belsky was the *rosh yeshivah* of the Masmidim program, and I was the director. I got involved in the Masmidim program 20 years ago, and that in itself is a special story.

When the campers went on a trip, Rav Belsky went, too. He sang with the *bachurim*, he said *divrei Torah*; he felt a *rebbe* should be *mashpia* even on trips. He would go swimming as well, and play paddleball; many people excitedly tell that they merited to play paddleball with Rav Belsky. Even though in recent years we established special swimming times for *rebbeim*, he always went during regular swim hours. He taught several boys how to swim as well as how to raft; he was always teaching.

Rav Belsky would often express how he would come out of the summer refreshed and rejuvenated. That might lead you to think that he relaxed and took it easy during the summer. Actually, he

was the hardest-working person in camp by far. All day the boys would ask him *sh'eilos*.

Every child was precious to Rav Belsky. Rav Belsky pointed out to me this past summer that the hundred boys in Masmidim were from 30 different *yeshivos*. He loved the fact that we were a mix.

As you know, camps often run into the issue of Elul starting during camp, and this past summer only 15 boys remained in camp at the start of Elul—and Rav Belsky stayed for them, giving them everything he had.

MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY MOMENT

I want to give you a picture of his daily schedule, so I will describe his Shabbos, which was supposed to be his day of rest.

Let's begin on Thursday night after *Maariv*. Rav Belsky would give a Daf Yomi *shiur*. Thursday nights we had a bonfire. He would go out into the woods and the campers would light the fire as Rav Belsky sang songs, gave over old *fartzeiteneshe niggunim* and encouraged the

AS TOLD TO NESANEL GANTZ

SUMMERS OF SERENITY

bachurim with words of *chizzuk*. This could go on easily until 1 a.m.

No matter what, he was there the next morning, giving a *shiur* from 6:45-7:15 to a group of *bachurim*. Whoever wanted to come joined; sometimes only one *bachur* showed up, and Rav Belsky learned with him. The last four years, I joined this *shiur* as well. When the Rav was sick four years ago, I made a promise to myself that when he gets better, I will join him in learning.

In the early years anyone could have a personal, private *seder* with Rav Belsky. He had dozens of *sedarim* with individuals throughout the week. Over the past few years, his schedule became more regulated due to his health.

Shacharis would be at 7:15, followed by a *shiur* in *Mishnah Berurah*, then breakfast and “calling hour.” Calling hour was something that I will never forget. For literally 60 minutes straight, Rav Belsky would answer questions from across the world on all topics, from matters of life and death to *kashrus* to anything in between. As so many people would be trying to reach him, at the end of a conversation he wouldn’t put the phone down to wait for it to ring. Instead, he would click the receiver and continue on to the next conversation. He had calling hour twice a day during the week, at breakfast and supper.

Rav Belsky would prepare *shiur* for a few minutes, and then came first *seder*. He would always come to the *beis midrash* to speak to the boys in learning. On Fridays, after the regular Gemara *shiur*, he would give a Chumash *shiur*. People came from all over to hear this Chumash *shiur*, and it was broadcast live on Kol Haloshon. Then he would *daven* early *Minchah* and go to his office, where there were always several people waiting to speak to him.

Everyone knew that if you wanted to speak to Rav Belsky, the place was Camp Agudah. After dealing with their *sh’eilos*, he ate lunch. Then he would usually play paddleball and go swimming before getting ready for Shabbos.

SHABBOS—SEUDOS, SHIURIM AND SO MUCH MORE

On Friday nights, Rav Belsky would *daven* with the campers. After *davening*, all the boys would walk by Rav Belsky (and the visiting *rav*) to shake his hand and wish him a good Shabbos.

The waiters in camp have a very hurried Friday night meal, in order to serve the campers and families. Immediately after *davening* Friday night, Rav Belsky would join the waiters for their meal. He wanted them to feel special and also have a *tzurah* of a *Shabbos seudah*. For five to ten minutes he would sing *zemiros* with them and speak with them. Only after that would he join his family for the *seudah*.

Rav Belsky would leave his family meal to join the Masmidim in their dining room for their meal. When he walked in, everyone would sing a specific song—literally, like a king just walked in. Eighteen years ago, Rav Belsky had relayed a story and taught a *niggun* that was sung when the Stoliner Rebbe, *zt”l*, entered and left a room; there was one song for his entrance and another for when he left. The *talmidim* decided to adapt this *niggun* for Rav Belsky as well. The *niggun* was passed down every year, and it became Rav Belsky’s



Rabbi Duvi Frischman with Rav Belsky at Camp Agudah

song. At the *levayah* at the airport, I asked a *talmid* if we should sing the song as we were being *melaveh* the *aron*. We didn’t, but he said *Rebbe* would have had a great laugh.

After *bentching* Friday night, Rav Belsky would make a *tish*; this would go strong until midnight or 1 a.m., when the Masmidim would walk him back to his bungalow. On Shabbos morning he would give the Daf Yomi *shiur*. He *leined* every Shabbos. During *Kiddush* he spoke to the Masmidim and then he would attend the *shiur* of the visiting *rav*.

Once, I approached Rav Belsky and mentioned that he didn’t have to attend the visiting *rav*’s *shiur*, but he was concerned that the *rav* might feel slighted. I told Rav Belsky that I would personally go to the visiting *rav* and explain how the Rosh Yeshivah is so overworked that we asked him not to go out of concern for his health. That worked; actually, it worked some of the time, depending on how far behind Rav Belsky was in *shnayim mikra*.

After the visiting *rav*’s *shiur* we had the *seudah*. Once again, Rav Belsky would leave his family’s meal to sit with his “other family,” the Masmidim *bachurim*. Rav Belsky dedicated his life to them. Following the *seudah*, Rav Belsky would give the Daf Yomi *shiur*, then a special *mussar vaad* to the *rebbeim* in camp before *Minchah*, followed by a *Pirkei Avos shiur* for at least an hour. During *shalosh seudos*, Rav Belsky would lead the *zemiros*; he was especially fond of the *niggun* “*Odeh laKel*.” After *Maariv* and *Havdalah*, Rav Belsky would return to his office, where every *sh’eilah* in the world awaited him.

KAVOD SHABBOS ON MOTZAEI SHABBOS

There were many things that Rav Belsky held that were especially important to give over to his *talmidim*, and *melaveh malkah* was one of them. He said, “You can’t just *chap* a piece of pizza. You have to set the table like a *shulchan aruch* and eat at least a *kezayis*.” He explained that on Motzaei Shabbos there is no *oneg Shabbos*, but there is still *kavod Shabbos* so the table has to be set properly, and there should be candles and *zemiros*. Rav Belsky would lead the

*zemiro*s, and often boys would make *siyumim* to add to the festive seriousness of the *melaveh malkah*. And always, there was dancing, as the *talmidim* would sing “*Yamim Al Yemei Melech*.”

It was amazing to see this contrast in camp. Here was Rav Belsky, a *melech*, revered by all, yet he would connect with every person on his own level and take an interest in his activities. He didn't consider himself to be special or different from everyone else.

CARING FOR EVERYONE

He believed in everyone's capabilities. He wanted everyone to feel special about himself. And it was real: He felt that everyone truly was special, and deserved special attention.

I recall one time a *talmid* had something minor wrong with his glasses, and he asked me if I could take his glasses to be fixed the next time I was going to town. I didn't have the opportunity to help him though, since Rav Belsky did. That's right—Rav Belsky saw that this *bachur* had a problem with his glasses, so the Rosh Yeshivah himself got into his car, drove the *bachur* to town, waited for him at the store and then brought him back. Why not? he reasoned. A *talmid* needed help!

Rabbi Mendel Silberberg from Sinai Academy had a program to bring *bachurim* from the former Soviet Union to Camp Agudah for a few weeks during the summer. The Masmidim *bachurim* would take 30-minute shifts learning with these *bachurim*. One *bachur* had a particularly hard time, so Rav Belsky learned with him, and he became a *ben bayis* in the Belsky home. (Rav Belsky's home was known to be an open house to all.)

The following year, Rav Belsky invited this boy along with his parents to the Pesach Seder in his home. Rav Belsky noticed that this boy's parents weren't exactly “into it.”

Switching gears, he began singing old Russian *Yiddishe niggunim*...and the boy's father started melting. By the end of the Seder, he expressed an interest in learning about *Yiddishkeit*. He learned and grew in his *Yiddishkeit*, but sadly was diagnosed with cancer and was *niftar* a few months later. The boy kept up his close connection to Rav Belsky, and got engaged to a girl from Lakewood this past summer. He was one of many who flourished under Rav Belsky's wing, without much fanfare or publicity.

HE LIVED IT

Though, as I mentioned, the Rosh Yeshivah went along on all the trips and joined the campers on hikes, tubing and rafting; in the later years, performing these physical activities became difficult for him. Nonetheless, he would come along on the trip and either learn or talk to *bachurim*. He thus taught us that even fun should be turned into a spiritual experience.

An older Masmid alumnus shared that Rav Belsky once told him, “Historians will never be able to describe the incredible feeling of Camp Agudah Masmidim. The only one who would be able to write it down properly would be poets.” Rav Belsky knew all about that magic—because he created it. ●

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Amazingly, a large package was just delivered into my memory, postmarked in 1975. Rav Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, was teaching us *Daf Yomi* each night, and we were approaching the end of *Brachos*. At that point we were gung-ho about the dream of sticking to the discipline of covering a page a day for seven-and-a-half years to finish the entire *Shas*. Finishing *Brachos* would be the first milestone on that long journey.

The antepenultimate *daf* (62a) includes this admonition: “Just as the dead are punished for their shortcomings, so too the eulogists.” Rav Belsky told us very seriously that the equivalence established here (“just as... so too...”) showed the severity of this particular form of inaccuracy. If one exaggerates the virtues of the deceased, it represented a serious violation. The eulogist is charged with the duty of capturing the essence of a life and preserving it in the consciousness of a generation. He must get it exactly right. He cannot sell that life short, nor may he foster an illusion of greatness and imprint a lie on the mind of mankind.

There is no danger of overselling Rav Belsky, a Torah giant who stood tall in our midst for close to eight decades. Instead, I fear we will inevitably fall short of delineating his stature. But I take heart from what he told us that day.

Rav Belsky went on to cite *Moed Katan* (25b), where Rav Ashi asked the top eulogists in his community what they planned to say at his funeral. Each one shared a proposed text, one comparing his passing to a cedar consumed by flames and the other to a lost treasure that leaves a community in despair. Hearing this, Rav Ashi became dispirited, and the eulogists both suffered a freak injury to the soles of their feet, which later prevented them from actually participating in his funeral.

Rashi and Rabbeinu Chananel interpret Rav Ashi’s dismay as a response to the content of their proposed obituaries. But Rav Belsky offered a novel interpretation. It was not what they said that disturbed him. It was the very fact that they were sizing him up during his lifetime and writing material for his memorials. As long as the person is alive, we must have a relationship with the heart, the mind and the soul of that person. It was inappropriate for them to step back and measure him for

the shroud. This explains why they suffered an injury to their feet. They were not punished for saying the wrong thing but for “standing” in the wrong place.

In this way, Rav Belsky explained, it is possible to fulfill this strict obligation neither to understate nor to overrate the achievements of the deceased. If we never think ahead to their death, if we embrace their life force until the last moment, then the moment of passing brings with it total clarity, a defined sense of exactly what has been lost.

The Talmud teaches elsewhere (*Avodah Zarah* 5b) that it takes 40 years to fully absorb the teachings of one’s mentor in Torah, a real “*rebbe*.” Exactly 40 years later I am finally grasping the import of Rav Belsky’s teaching, on the eve of his own funeral and eulogy. I feel his loss keenly.

I was only eleven years old that first summer in Camp

BY RABBI YAAKOV DOVID HOMNICK

THE IMPORT OF RAV BELSKY’S TEACHINGS

"THERE IS NO DANGER OF OVERSELLING RAV BELSKY, A TORAH GIANT WHO STOOD TALL IN OUR MIDST FOR CLOSE TO EIGHT DECADES. INSTEAD, I FEAR WE WILL INEVITABLY FALL SHORT OF DELINEATING HIS STATURE."

Agudah, and we did not study more than 90 minutes a day, yet I was captivated by the tall rabbi, six-foot-four or so, who seemed equally at ease giving learned lectures in the morning, and playing a mean game of handball in the afternoon. His manner was complaisant and he was seldom ruffled. I found him to be utterly compelling. Each summer I came back, still a frivolous, playful kid, but always watching Rav Belsky, studying his demeanor, listening to his conversation when I could get close enough.

Turning 15 ended my eligibility as a camper, but there was a special program for "masmidim." I was a noted goof-off in school the year round, but Rav Belsky surprised everyone by accepting me into this coterie of motivated students. If he thought for a moment he could change me within a month or two in a relaxed environment, the moment soon passed. I gave him a run for the money all summer, coming late, missing classes, taking unauthorized voyages off camp grounds. He patiently contended with my monkeyshines, although he asked me to stop leading my peers into joining my little adventures.

I still feel terrible guilt about the morning he woke me to travel with him to New York to attend Rav Henkin's funeral. Foolishly I begged off, because I had not heard of Rav Henkin. I should have had the good sense to recognize that Rav Belsky was reaching out to me, trying to sensitize me to the value of great people and the importance of key moments. Even without that, the opportunity to spend a few hours on the road with Rav Belsky should have roused me from my torpor. Sadly I allowed laziness and obstinacy to triumph; I can still visualize the pained look on his face.

Despite missing a lot of chances, I did learn a great deal from

Rav Belsky that summer. He was very open with our group, and he opened a window into his personal history and his views on a broad range of subjects.

A unique feature of Rav Belsky as a personal mentor to us was his willingness to interact in informal settings. To give us a taste of the camping experience, despite our long learning schedule, he organized little campfires on occasional evenings. We would roast hot dogs and marshmallows and he would share *divrei Torah* and tell stories of *gedolim*. The Torah ideas he shared at those gatherings were clever and stimulating.

He told us that his grade point average in high school would have been one hundred, if not for one doctrinaire teacher who believed the imperfection of the human being should be reflected in his score. Despite testing at one hundred percent, Rav Belsky got a ninety-nine on his report card for that subject, as a lesson that no one knows everything about anything. Sitting with us 20 years later, he was still peeved at the unnamed pedagogue who denied him the privilege of maintaining a perfect score through all his subjects.

We asked him why he had chosen not to attend university, after such a stellar secular career at the high school level. He explained that Rav Mendlowitz of Torah Vodaath had invited Rav Aharon Kotler of Lakewood to address the students. Rav Aharon presented in fiery terms his opinion that a *yeshivah* boy had no business going to college, and he should devote himself to Torah studies. "Hearing Rav Aharon Kotler deliver that message I had the sensation that I was receiving Torah from Sinai. It was simply unthinkable that I could defy such a clear directive."

Skipping college did not shortchange him in his gathering of

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knowledge. He knew how to open a book without a professor telling him what he was reading. In fact, his erudition across a wide range of disciplines was awesome.

I once sat in the back seat of his car for several hours driving from Brooklyn to the Catskills. In the front passenger seat was a history buff, who kept quizzing him about Jewish life in France in the Middle Ages. I sat spellbound as Rav Belsky described each French monarch and his relationship to the Jews, then outlined the geographical and cultural shifts that accompanied the political activity. All this was delivered with a fluency suggesting he had just delivered a paper on the subject at the Sorbonne.

At 17 I was back in camp again, this time as a counselor. I was anxious to find some time to slip away from my responsibilities to attend the Daf Yomi by Rav Belsky. My junior counselor, Shloimy Ross, cut a deal with me where I gave him certain breaks in return for his covering for me so I could attend. It was an absolute delight to hear Rav Belsky once again, this time at an age where I could appreciate his ideas in more depth.

Forty years later, I still recall a beautiful thought he delivered in one of those classes:

The Gemara asks: What is the proper blessing to be recited when enjoying persimmon oil? It quotes Rav Yehudah of Bavel, who says one should recite “Blessed is He Who creates the oil of our land.” Apparently persimmon oil was a particularly celebrated product of the land of Israel. The Gemara rejects this view, saying it could not be trusted because of Rav Yehudah’s inordinate love of Eretz Yisrael. Instead it adopts the view of Rabbi Yochanan, who suggests this text: “Blessed is He Who creates sweet oil.”

It is unheard of for a scholar’s legal view to be rejected based on imputed bias. We always trust the great *gedolim* to rise above self-interest or emotional attachment to deliver an objective view. This instance is a total outlier: Rav Yehudah is so madly in love with Eretz Yisrael



that any legal position he takes favoring it is not reliable. Whom do we trust instead? Rabbi Yochanan, who apparently does not suffer from excessive devotion to the land.

Now what do we know about Rav Yehudah and Rabbi Yochanan? Elsewhere in the Talmud we are taught that Rav Yehudah lived in Bavel his entire life and never had the privilege of visiting the Holy Land. On the other hand, Rabbi Yochanan took pride in the fact that he was born in Eretz Yisrael and never left it even for a brief time.

This shows us that even the great love for the Holy Land can be flattened by familiarity. Rabbi Yochanan, who was used to being in Israel, was not nearly as enamored of the land as was Rav Yehudah, who never got the chance to actually behold the object of his affections.

Twice in the course of that summer’s Daf Yomi, Rav Belsky became riled up and issued passionate pleas to the participants. Once was on *Brachos* 34a, where the Mishnah and Gemara discuss the approach to take when offered to lead the *davening* in *shul*—to take the *amud*. A person should not say yes immediately, nor should he persist in refusing. He should modestly demur at first, but

then accept the second request by the *gabbai*. That way he is neither too eager nor too difficult.

Rav Belsky paused and lectured us about people who turn the situation into an embarrassing show, one after another refusing the *gabbai* as he walks from person to person around the *shul*. He is humiliated, the process drags on and whoever finally goes up feels a little foolish as well. Rav Belsky thought that was entirely inappropriate, violating the letter and spirit of the Talmud.

“Some of these people may be physically mature, even married,” he said. “But they lack the maturity to be part of a Torah community.”

On another occasion, he responded to something we learned by launching into a fervent appeal to every *yeshivah bachur* to prepare a *dvar Torah* on the week’s Torah reading before going home for Shabbos. Every student must understand that his family and his community are supporting him in *yeshivah*, and they have an expectation that he is learning something important that justifies their investment.

Most Jews in the neighborhood will not be educated enough to converse with the *yeshivah bachur* on the complex legal issues he may be analyzing in

"I SAT SPELLBOUND AS RAV BELSKY DESCRIBED EACH FRENCH MONARCH AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE JEWS, THEN OUTLINED THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SHIFTS THAT ACCOMPANIED THE POLITICAL ACTIVITY."

Bava Kamma, but they do understand and appreciate a nice insight into the *parshah*. If someone in *shul* asks a *bachur* for a thought on the *parshah* and he fumbles, it reflects badly on the entire institution of young men devoting years to studying in *yeshivah*.

At the age of 19, I was named to succeed Chaim Dovid Zwiebel as editor of the *Zeirei Forum*, a magazine published by *Zeirei Agudas Yisroel* and distributed to *yeshivos* around the world. Rabbi Yaakov Bender approached me with the offer, but I always suspected it was Rav Belsky's suggestion. The editorial board consisted of Rav Pam and Rav Belsky, and nothing was published without their approval.

It was fascinating to observe the interplay. Although Rav Pam was a generation older, and Rav Belsky showed him the utmost deference, they each had one vote, and Rav Belsky was not afraid to assert his opinion. In the case of one controversial article I wanted to publish, Rav Pam voted no and Rav Belsky voted yes, so *Zeirei* sent the matter to my *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Hutner, to cast the deciding vote. (He joined Rav Pam, and the article did not run.)

Rav Belsky was a great husband and a great father and a great teacher and a great patron of the needy and the alienated. His children and students are high achievers, and their success bears witness to his efforts.

He did not try to promote himself as a mystic or a holy man, but we could all

observe the quiet seriousness he brought to each aspect of Torah observance. But the story that rocked the *yeshivah* world and made everyone step back in awe involved a charity case where he arranged for eleven students to each say one month of *Kaddish* for a Jew who had passed away without children.

At one point during the year, he called in the people he had recruited for this mitzvah and asked if anyone had missed a day. The departed individual had come to him in a dream complaining that he had been abandoned and left without a *Kaddish*. He asked the group if they could offer any explanation. At first they all claimed they had been careful never to miss.

Eventually they figured out what happened. On a two-day Rosh Chodesh, the fellow from the first month thought both days counted for the next month, while the new fellow started saying it on the first day of the new month, i.e. the second day of Rosh Chodesh. As a result, one day had gone uncovered.

There was no way to correct the oversight, but thenceforth people looked at Rav Belsky with new respect. Although, as the Rambam says, we should respect Torah knowledge more than miraculous occurrences, the latter helps people to appreciate the former.

One last story before we reluctantly say goodbye. This sums up Rav Belsky's abil-

ity to combine scholarship and excitement in a way that enabled young students to appreciate him even in his advanced age.

One Thursday about five years ago, Rav Belsky was giving *shiur* and he experienced a wave of fatigue. He decided that he needed a little outing to recharge his batteries. He stopped and said to one of the *bachurim*, "Doesn't your brother own a place in the Hamptons? Do you think he would let us use it for Shabbos?"

"I can text him," the young man said. Rav Belsky told him to go ahead. Within minutes, his brother answered that it was fine.

"Okay," Rav Belsky announced. "Do we have nine *bachurim* here who want to go with me? Let's not wait until we leave this room or it will never happen. Whoever is ready to join, raise your hand." A full *minyana* of hands shot up into the air right away.

"Okay. Reuven, you bring gefilte fish. Shimon, you bring kugel. Levi, you bring chicken... I will bring the *Sefer Torah* from the *yeshivah*." He parceled out all the assignments and sure enough, everyone enjoyed an unforgettable Shabbos in Rav Belsky's inimitable company.

Now he is bringing that spirit to the *Mesivta d'Rakiya*. Indeed, as the eulogists told Rav Ashi prematurely: "Cry for the mourners, but not for the object of our loss, because it has reached its tranquility, but we are left in despair." ●

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(seated) Rav Belsky, Rabbi Genack and Simcha Katz

As head of the OU's Kosher Division, you worked together with Rav Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, for many years.

Yes, 28 years. He joined the OU in 1987. We had two halachic consultants, Rabbi Belsky and Rabbi Herschel Schachter. At first Rabbi Belsky used to come into the office twice a week. Then a few years ago, due to scheduling and other reasons, he would come in on Thursdays, bringing along some of his *talmidim* from Torah Vodaath so they could see the process of *diyun*—around five boys every week.

Who was the senior of the two, Rabbi Belsky or Rabbi Schachter?

In terms of authority they were equal.

How did Rabbi Belsky's hiring come about?

The first time I met him was on a boat. He was working for a different *kashrus* agency at the time. I remember I was there with Simcha Katz and Rabbi Gruber. We were investigating a certain issue about cooking oil that was being imported from the Far East. I believe the issue reemerged a couple of years ago, but this was 30 years ago. Rabbi Belsky thought it was *muttar*. He went into the belly of this enormous, cavernous ship just to look at it. He always approached things in terms of practical application. Is this an issue? Would it be *battul b'shishim*? He could do all these mathematical calculations in his head. I was just so impressed with him at the time. Later, I asked if he would work for the OU. I told him that he could use this extraordinary ability of his on a much larger scale. We were fortunate to have him. It was such an inspiration just to see him *davening Shemoneh Esrei*. He'd give a talk before the *Yomim Nora'im* to the entire staff and inspire us all. He was a wise person, with extraordinary integrity, and brought all this knowledge to us. He was really an exceptional person. Unique.

In what sense?

First of all, he had tremendous knowledge of all aspects of Torah. He was extremely well versed in *Shulchan Aruch*, *Shach*, *Taz* and *poskim*, and was proficient in *Tanach*. He was also very knowledgeable in the sciences. I was told that when he was younger he used to teach math at Torah Vodaath.

All these things were tremendously important for the determination of *halachah* and its application on a practical level, especially in terms of the modern food industry. His grasp of the science behind technology was very important in terms of making halachic decisions.

The Orthodox Union has something called Ask the OU Rabbanim. Every two years we get together with rabbis and *talmidim* from different *kollelim* and communities to study *inyanei kashrus*. Rabbi Belsky would often give a class about the anatomy of animals and relevant *halachos* of *treifus* as it relates to *nikkur*. Who else knows that kind of thing?

He was a *shochet* as well as a *mohel*. As a matter of fact, when Rav Avraham Shapira was Chief Rabbi of Israel—they were actually cousins somehow—the only person he had confidence in with regard to which meats could be imported from America for the *Rabbanut Harashit* was Rabbi Belsky.

He was also a *dayan*, the perfect combination of abstract, theoretical *halachah* and its practical implementation. He was a great *lamdan*, yet he could also apply it.

What was his mesorah with regard to psak?

He was a product of Torah Vodaath and learned in Bais Medrash Elyon. If I'm not mistaken, Rav Reuvain Grozovsky was still alive when he first came to Torah Vodaath. He was also a *talmid* of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky and would frequently quote him. I believe he also

learned by Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, where he did *shimush*, and received *semichah* from both of them. When it came of the issue of the anisaki worms in fish, he would quote things Rav Moshe had said and what his approach would have been. I remember we once had an issue about using toothpaste without supervision; he was of the opinion that it wasn’t necessary because Rav Yaakov had said you can’t have *taam k’ikar* due to something that’s not for consumption. But he later changed his ruling because of the way it is now made.

Who’s going to take his place?

He’s irreplaceable. Obviously, I’m going to have to think about that, although I hasten to add that everyone on the staff of our Kashrus Division is a *talmid chacham* who knows how to deal with a *sh’eilah* and so on. A lot of the issues that come up had already been posed to him and Rabbi Schachter, codified and written down, and we will continue to follow these in the future.

I once put out a *sefer* with these *psakim*, but it was only distributed to *rabbanim*. I’m actually thinking about publishing a little *kuntris* of some of Rabbi Belsky’s rulings in his memory. His language was very elegant, very beautiful.

I once asked Rabbi Schachter what the policy was at the OU if he and Rabbi Belsky disagreed. He told me that yours was the deciding opinion.

Yes, if there was a stalemate they would solicit my opinion.

Rabbi Belsky was highly respected by the yeshivah crowd, so they in turn came to rely on the OU. Will you be looking for someone with the same appeal to the chareidi community as a replacement?

As I indicated before, our entire staff is composed of *talmidei chachamim*, which isn’t commonplace for a *kashrus* organization. *Baruch Hashem*, Rabbi Schachter is



Rav Belsky and Rav Schachter

also still available for consultation. And while no one will ever be able to fill Rabbi Belsky’s shoes, he left an invaluable legacy of rulings for us as we move forward.

Four years ago he was very ill and recovered.

Yes, it was a miraculous recovery. While he continued to have problems with his back and with walking, cognitively he was in full strength. His death was particularly stunning because just a few weeks ago he was in the office and he was fine.

I always thought of Rabbi Belsky as indestructible, especially after he recovered against all the odds. He passed away from some kind of cancer. Whatever it was it was quite sudden and extremely painful.

I’d like to mention that in his now-famous speech in Lakewood he mentioned

that he had asked Rav Chaim Kanievsky what to do, and was told that he should learn Chumash. He knew big parts of it by heart. Even in pain, the only thing he did was learn.

Two and a half weeks ago I was going to pay him a visit. But right before I was about to get into my car, his *gabbai* called and said he was in too much pain.

His passing is a great loss to kosher consumers.

We feel it acutely at the OU, but it’s a tremendous loss for *klal Yisrael*. Rav Belsky was a champion for Torah and the pursuit of justice. He was concerned with every individual, those no one else would think of. There was a constant flow of people coming to him for help. He was a man of enormous courage. There was no one like him.

BY RABBI YITZCHOK FRANKFURTER

EM GENACK

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
OF THE ORTHODOX UNION’S
KOSHER DIVISION

The elevator doors opened and there stood Rav Belsky, towering above a group of adoring boys and *bachurim*, all of whom have Down syndrome. Rav Belsky's face radiated joy as he smiled at his elevator-mates, wishing them a good day, but not before each of the special souls bent to kiss Rav Belsky's hand.

Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom is situated in the world-renowned Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. YBL, as it has come to be known, is a *yeshivah* for boys and young adults with Down syndrome/developmental delays, the first of its kind. For a special education *yeshivah* program to be located within a mainstream *yeshivah* has been unprecedented in the history of "yeshivish special education." Torah Vodaath rose to the occasion and, with the encouragement and blessing of Rav Pam, *zt"l*, and its executive board of directors, opened its doors and heart to Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom, which is now in its 15th year of operation.

Rav Belsky took YBL under his wing and served as the *yeshivah's posek*, mentor and "zeidy figure." He was always there for its *rosh yeshivah*, Rabbi Horowitz, answering any *sh'eilos* pertaining to the *yeshivah*, whether it was about *tefillin* and the *chiyuv* of the *yeshivah's* population, whether it was about the strategic placement of a *mezuzah*, or any other relevant matter.

Rav Belsky never acted uncomfortably around our boys. In fact, he embraced them publicly, serving as a



Rav Belsky and the talmidim of Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom

true leader and example for all those who were watching his every move and aimed to emulate his *gadlus*. Rav Belsky derived personal *nachas* from the *talmidim's* achievements and progress, and he used to beam as he told Rabbi Horowitz that he sees tremendous progress in the students with each passing day. Rav Belsky's expressions of personal *nachas* lent tremendous encouragement to the principal and staff of Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom.

On a daily basis, just as Rav Belsky finished *davening Shacharis* and exited the Torah Vodaath *beis hamidrash*, walking toward the elevator, the students of YBL arrived. Frequently, they would join the *rosh yeshivah* in the elevator and he basked in their presence, with great delight. On numerous occasions, a YBL student would hit the elevator button to the fourth floor, thus causing Rav Belsky to travel the extra distance. When apolo-

gies were offered and cancellations were attempted, the *rosh yeshivah* wouldn't hear of it. He felt it was his honor and duty to see these boys off to their floor before he got to his. Individuals with Down syndrome have a G-d-given gift where they sense who truly loves them and who just "plays the role." With Rav Belsky there was genuine warmth, love and concern. One of the *bachurim* of YBL has an innate fantasy that he is a *rosh yeshivah*. When addressed by his first name, he will reply, "I am a *rosh yeshivah*." However, when it came to his relationship vis-à-vis Rav Belsky, this student always abdicated his perceived role and acknowledged that Rav Belsky was indeed the genuine Rosh HaYeshivah.

While riding that elevator, individuals would occasionally step in to try to get a private word with the *rosh yeshivah*, oftentimes a private *sh'eilah*, and

BY SARAH SANDER

A LEADER FOR ALL

ask whether the YBL students can step out. Rav Belsky never ever accepted that. Nobody shooed around these special boys.

Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom has celebrated many *siyumim* and special events heralding the learning and completion of specific studies. On numerous occasions *roshei yeshivah* and *gedolim* came to the *siyum* and *farher* and always lent an air of seriousness to these special celebrations, but the *farher* on *hilchos tefillah* that Rav Belsky conducted is the most memorable one. The *rosh yeshivah* elaborated on each student's answer with such love and simplicity, making the responder feel so special, while at the same time assuring that all the boys understood the question and answer to perfection. Rav Belsky truly believed that our boys had the potential to learn and understand.

Last year, at the start of the school year, YBL had to expand its premises and an additional classroom was constructed. Rav Belsky was invited to hang the mezu-

zah and Rabbi Horowitz offered to come tell him precisely when all were assembled and the ceremony was ready to proceed, so as not to waste a moment of the *rosh yeshivah's* time. When the appointed time came, Rabbi Horowitz went down to the *beis midrash* where Rav Belsky was in the midst of an in-depth *shmuess*, surrounded by many *bnei Torah*. His *gabbai* stood at the door and motioned to Rabbi Horowitz that this looked like an impossibility. Rabbi Horowitz gently stepped into the *beis midrash* and the moment Rav Belsky saw him, the *rosh yeshivah* stopped talking, closed his Gemara and got up and joined the YBL principal. Hundreds of eyes looked on at this mysterious interruption and to Rabbi Horowitz's guilt-ridden face Rav Belsky announced, "For these boys I'll do everything!" Rav Belsky proceeded to join the waiting crowd upstairs, affixed the mezuzah, sat down for a *l'chaim*, and spoke to each *talmid* of Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom, as if the whole world had

stopped in time.

Several years back, an issue arose that smacked of pain. Rabbi Horowitz wrote up a synopsis of the history of the issue at hand and all pertaining details. Rav Belsky read it briefly and delivered a *psak* with such clarity and knowledge and pursuit of *shalom* that it was unfathomable. Here was a situation that had been dragging on for a long time and seemed muddled and confusing, yet the *rosh yeshivah* had it all figured out and sorted through with crystal-clear understanding, and his *psak* on behalf of the students of YBL was truly one of *gadlus*.

Rav Belsky's *pashtus* and humility were his shining stars among numerous traits. Each *talmid* of Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom warranted his undivided attention, pat on the cheek, warm smile and inquiry about personal matters.

The world at large has lost a leader, and while we all mourn, Yeshiva Bonim Lamokom grieves its personal loss. ●

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Editorial

RABBI YITZCHOK FRANKFURTER

Remembering Rav Belsky, zt”l



Reb Avraham (Romi) Chon (seated left), a talmid, Rabbi Frankfurter and Rav Belsky

As *klal Yisrael* mourns the passing of the great *posek* and *rosh yeshivah* Rav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, zt”l (August 22, 1938–January 28, 2016), many people are sharing the astonishment they felt upon meeting this great Talmudic scholar for the first time and realizing how knowledgeable he was in subjects as diverse as mathematics, botany, biology, astronomy and history—all of which served as a means to enhance his unparalleled understanding of the Torah.

I too had the great privilege of witnessing up close his astounding versatility, as well as his refreshing candor and sense of humor. I merited to speak with Rav Belsky a number of times, but perhaps most memorable was a conversation I had with him on Friday morning, August 24, 2012, with regard to the attempts that were being made by the City of New York to curtail *metzitzah b’peh*. Health officials had issued a statement strongly urging that direct oral suction not be performed during circumcision, and demanded that parents sign a consent waiver if they insisted upon it. I met with him in a classroom at Yeshiva Torah Vodaas on East 9th Street in the Kensington section of Brooklyn, along with the renowned *mohel* Reb Avraham (Romi) Chon.

Just seeing Rav Belsky in good health was exhilarating. In mid-February of that year, Hatzalah had rushed him to the hospital with a ruptured esophagus and a collapsed lung. He remained

hospitalized for nearly three months, during which time he went into cardiac arrest. His life-threatening condition became the concern of the entire Jewish community. One of his *talmidim* shared with me that our meeting was actually the first he had presided over since being released from a medical facility at the end of May.

Smart people usually don’t suffer fools gladly, and Rav Belsky was as smart as they come. He let us know in no uncertain terms what he thought about the “fools” running New York. As he was also a practicing *mohel*, he had firsthand knowledge of the subject and spoke at length about the baselessness of the allegations about the health risks involved in the procedure.

“The legislature is going to tell us how to make *brissin*?” he asked rhetorically. “No professional *mohel* would trust himself to touch a baby until he had watched a few hundred *brissin*. His hands tremble before he’s confident enough to make a *tefisah*—even if he does it with a guard or a hemostat. Every *mohel* practices a hundred times before he performs one *bris*. They were all once apprentices. For the first two years, maybe they were allowed to sweep the floor.

“Where do these people come in and tell *mohalim* what to do? They don’t have any understanding of [what’s involved]. I spoke to Dr. Tom Frieden, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and went through the statistics. The numbers don’t show that there is any problem, but he doesn’t under-

Editorial

stand this. The only person who is truly smart is [Mayor Michael] Bloomberg. He's a *gor groisesh baal kisharon*. Bloomberg got up in City Hall and said, 'Ich bin a Yid. As long as I'm in office, there won't be a problem!' He apparently changed his mind—made a complete U-turn."

I asked Rav Belsky whether he thought Bloomberg had an anti-religious agenda.

"I think there's no agenda. I think Bloomberg has issues," he told me candidly. "Look at what he's doing with soda! His proposal to ban sugary drinks larger than 16 ounces from eateries, street carts and stadiums is laughable. What's his problem? *Yenne ken nisht koiften tzvei?* (A person can't buy two?) I'm telling you, the best bottle in the world is the two-liter bottle because nobody finishes it. Halfway through, it loses the fizz and ends up in the garbage can."

I asked Rav Belsky what he thought about the proposal to allow circumcisions only in hospitals.

"I know more about hospitals now, after having spent so much time in them recently," was his rejoinder. "When they were considering moving me from St. Barnabas to the Kessler Rehabilitation Center, where there isn't any medical equipment, it was a question of whether I could still improve with some medical treatment at St. Barnabas. They said, 'Get him out of here! This is a hospital! He'll get sick!' Now they say we should go into hospitals to do *milah*?"

"There's a field in mathematics called statistics. Mathematically, the number of kids who get infected from *metzitzah* is so low that it doesn't even weigh in as a percentage. It's not even on the chart. When the numbers are that low, it is impossible to determine the true cause of herpes. There can be so many unknown factors."

"What does the Rosh Yeshivah recommend *halachah l'maaseh*? How should we counter the efforts to curtail *metzitzah b'peh*?" I asked.

In response he went from the practical to the spiritual.

"What should we do? I'll tell you. *Maaseh shehayah* (a true story). Many years ago, when I was a Pirchei leader looking for stories for my group, I read in an old Yiddish storybook with crumpled-up pages about a Russian general who sent a letter to the *rosh hakahal* of a certain town, telling him that the army was going to be headquartered there and they needed a building to serve as their office. They searched all over and saw that the only suitable building was the *shul*, so they decided to take it over.

"Immediately, the *Yidden* called a meeting to see what to do. There were several opinions. One person held that they should send a delegation to bribe the *poritz*. Another said to write a letter to a bigger general, and so on. Finally, one guy got up and said, 'I'm not really that worried. The windows of the *shul* are all cracked; they should have been fixed ten years ago. There's a leak in the ceiling. The pipes are broken. There are so many things wrong that when they walk in and see all the problems, they'll just leave.'

"The *rav* then said, 'I didn't understand why they were taking the *shul* from us, but now I do. We take good care of our houses and fix things when they break, but everything is broken in the *shul* because we don't take care of it. Hashem is telling us that we don't deserve to have a *shul*! What we need to do is fix up the *shul* and show how much we care about it.' So they refurbished it. Indeed, when the general rode into town and took one look at the renovated *shul*, he said to his assistant, 'Who suggested this building? It's totally unsuitable!' and they left.

"The same principle applies to us. *Metzitzah* is one of the *devarim ha'omdim b'rumo shel olam* (most important things), yet people are *mezalzel* (belittle) it. There are many *chashuveh mohalim* who don't do a good *metzitzah*. Their lips barely touch, and only for the smallest fraction of a second.

"When I do a *metzitzah*, I draw the blood from the *mekomos rechokim*. I once did a *bris* where the elderly Rav Elimelech Ashkenazi from Melbourne was present and he said, 'Azo! *hubben mir gemacht in der heim* (that's the way we did it in prewar Europe)! I didn't know anyone still did it like that!' We have to be *mechazeik metzitzah*, and then Hashem won't take it away from us. That's our task. There's a *rifyon* (weakening) in *metzitzah*, and that's why it's being challenged.

"*Metzitzah* is the part of *milah* where *tzugevointkeit* (routine) can

"We need tefillah. Many times we make the mistake of trying to deal with a crisis without looking to Hashem."

lead to the *mohel* not doing it as required. Other components can't be performed to a lesser or greater degree, but *metzitzah* can become *kal* (taken lightly) and not be done as the *halachah* dictates. We have to do everything we can to counter this lack of diligence and also thwart what the government is doing. Additionally, we have to be *mispallel*."

Then, with his eyes welling up, he said, "I just went through a *matzav* (situation) where the doctors told me they'd never seen anything like it. There was nothing left of my *guf* (body). They said there was nothing to do for me... They couldn't believe I'd had all those treatments and my mind was completely unaffected. I told the doctor that it was because of the *tefillos* of thousands of Jews.

"We need *tefillah*. Many times we make the mistake of trying to deal with a crisis without looking to Hashem."

In answer to our prayers, the decree against *metzitzah b'peh* was in fact annulled. We now need Hashem to console us over this *gadol's* passing. ●