

ישראל אשר בך אתפאר



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INDEX

Biography	6
<i>Rebbi of Rebbeim</i>	14
Pioneering in <i>Kashrus</i>	16
Working to Find <i>Emes</i> and Restore <i>Shalom</i>	18
<i>Rebbi</i> in Torah, <i>Rebbi</i> in <i>Middos</i>	22
A Heart Overflowing With <i>Ahavas Yisrael</i>	26
The <i>Rebbi</i> Who Changed My Life	28
Answering the Questions That “We-Don’t-Ask”	30
My Memories of a Legendary <i>Rebbi</i>	32
Undying <i>Aveilus</i> for an Ultimate <i>Av</i> , An Unbelievable <i>Avreich</i> , an Indomitable <i>Even Ha’ezer</i>	34
<i>Hespeidim</i> at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath <i>Levayah</i>	36
<i>Hespeidim</i> at the Mirrer Yeshiva, Yerushalayim <i>Levayah</i>	39

A LEADER TO GO OUT BEFORE THEM

When Moshe Rabbeinu was told that he was soon to leave this world, he prayed, “G-d of the spirits ... Appoint a man over the flock ... who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall take them out and bring them in; and let the flock of Hashem not be like sheep without a shepherd.”

Rashi quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma* to explain the curious title “G-d of the spirits”: Only Hashem knows the particular spirit of each person. Moshe said, “Appoint a leader who will understand and accept each person according to his spirit.”

The Alter Vorker Rebbe took it a step further. Moshe asked for a leader “who shall go out before them” — someone whose heart and soul goes out for every Jew.

Such a leader was Harav Yisroel Belsky, *zt”l*.

Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, senior halachic consultant for the Orthodox Union, Rav of Camp Agudah, leader of Vaad L’hatzolas Nidchei Yisrael, *Rebbi* of a generation of *marbitzei Torah*, *askanim* and *ehrliche baalei batim*. The list goes on.

He was called an *ish eshkolos* — from the words *ish shehakol bo* — a person who encompasses everything. He was a master, brilliant in all aspects of Torah and in all practical applications

of *Halachah*.

Perhaps most of all, his greatness was in his love for *Klal Yisrael*. It was never about him. He was a leader “whose heart and soul went out for the flock.” After a miraculous recovery from an earlier, serious illness, he said, “You get a feeling that if the *Eibershter* did *nissim* supernaturally, I’m not here just to eat and drink; there is a reason.”

Rav Belsky lived for his family and for his extended family of *talmidim*. Hundreds if not thousands of *talmidim* felt he was their father. His *ahavah* to them was legendary.

But Harav Belsky was also accessible to anyone who came to consult with him on any subject. His analysis was sharp and comprehensive; his advice, or *psak* as the case may be, was unequivocal. Remarkably, no special connections were needed to get his personal attention and sincere respect.

Hamodia was privileged to have a close relationship with Harav Belsky. After each encounter we were in awe of his humility even as we benefitted from his exceptional, multi-faceted brilliance.

חבל על דאבדין ולא משתכחין

-The Editors

Homegrown Gadlus

The All-Encompassing Brilliance of Hagaon Harav Yisroel Belsky, *zt”l*

YOCHONON DONN

Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky had a brilliant, analytic mind, was a *baki* in *Halachah*, involved in helping Yidden from the former Soviet Union, one of the premier *kashrus* experts in the world, a *Rosh Yeshivah* of a world-class *mosad*, Rav in Camp Agudah, proficient in many fields of science, and helped countless people who sought his assistance and advice.

Rav Belsky was able to answer questions about doctors’ “Do Not Resuscitate” orders one minute and the next have a conversation with a child about his popsicle. He was so difficult to get through to but freely gave out his private cellphone number to a woman in Belarus who worked in *kiruv*.

He taught *horaah* to hundreds of *talmidim*, gave a daily *Daf Yomi shiur* for decades, authored the *sefer Einei Yisrael* on *Chumash*, co-led the halachic bureau of the world’s largest *kashrus* agency, yet was the first and last call to hundreds of people around the globe. Harav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, *zt”l*, called him “*Pe’er Hador*.” “He was an *ish emes*,” stated another *Gadol*, one not given to superlatives.

A self-taught prodigy, Rav Belsky, who was *niftar* last Thursday night, was a uniquely multifaceted individual. He was a throwback to a previous era when Rabbanim instantaneously knew every area of *Halachah*. He had a grasp of the real-world implications of his *psakim* and an astonishing expertise in the minutiae of how things work. He knew the human anatomy on a par with doctors, was as at home in astronomy as a NASA scientist, and was as intimately familiar with the plant and animal kingdom as a professor of botany.

One *talmid* from the 1960s recalled how Rav Belsky taught them *Maseches Brachos* one year. Not content with explaining the archaic recipe and 2,000-year-old methods of baking, Rav Belsky went so far as to bring in the ingredients and prepare it together with the class. Afterward, the *talmidim* would enjoy eating their Talmudic creations.

“I don’t remember how much I



learned that year,” the *talmid* noted dryly, “but we certainly gained a lot.”

Background

Harav Yisroel Belsky was born in Williamsburg in 1938 to the American Torah world’s royal family. His grandfather, Rabbi Binyamin Wilhelm, had founded Yeshiva Torah Vodaath 20 years previously, and there was no question which yeshivah the young Sruly would attend.

Rav Belsky was named for his paternal grandfather, a Lithuanian native who passed away at a young age. He had been conscripted into the Russian Tsar’s army as a young man and never had the chance to learn. But he loved *talmidei chachamim* and played an integral role in the opening of Torah Vodaath, according to Harav Mendel Belsky, a brother of Rav Belsky.

“Reb Yisroel Belsky — my grandfather — was a big *ohev Torah*,” Rav Mendel Belsky said, “even though he was not a *talmid chacham* on his own.”

The story of Torah Vodaath’s founding has many versions, but this is the way the family knows it, as heard from Rabbi Wilhelm.

When Rabbi Wilhelm made the decision to start a yeshivah, he gathered a group of *baalei batim* to help him. However, when his recruitment efforts fell short — he was only able to gather 35 *talmidim* for all seven grades of the yeshivah — the board of directors informed him right before Yom Kippur that they would not be opening that year.

“My *zeide* said, ‘How can you do such a thing; it’s the *Yom Hadin*?’” said Rav Mendel Belsky. “They said, ‘OK, we’ll wait until after the *Yom Hadin*.’ On Yom Kippur morning he *davened* at home for around an hour. He then ran from shul to shul and begged people to send their children to yeshivah.

“That Yom Kippur he got another 35 children,” he said. “After Yom Kippur the board got together and he said, ‘Now we have 70 children.’”

The yeshivah, which today is known as the *eim hayeshivos* — the mother of all American yeshivos — opened the next day.

Rabbi Wilhelm went to Mr. Yisroel Belsky, who had a prosperous textile factory, to ask for money. Coming out with the then-considerable sum of \$2,000, Rabbi Wilhelm noticed Mr. Belsky’s two children, including five-year-old Berel. “Why are you not sending your kids to yeshivah?” he questioned.

Mr. Belsky agreed to send them.

A self-taught prodigy, Rav Belsky was a throwback to a previous era when Rabbanim instantaneously knew every area of *Halachah*.

So that day Rabbi Wilhelm registered his future son-in-law into the inaugural class of Torah Vodaath. Reb Berel eventually went to learn in the Chofetz Chaim's yeshivah in Radin for three years, returning shortly before the passing of his father in the 1930s.

It was Harav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, *zt"l*, the legendary founder of Torah Vodaath's *mesivta*, who suggested the *shidduch* between the yeshivah's star *talmid* and Chana Tzirel, the daughter of the yeshivah's founder. The couple got married and Reb Berel attempted to begin a career in *chinuch* by teaching a *shiur* in *Ketzos* in Torah Vodaath. The *shiur* didn't last long, and Reb Berel tried his hand at various trades.

He joined his father's successful textile firm, but when his father was *niftar* and his brothers decided to keep the business open on Shabbos, he withdrew.

Mrs. Tsurtie Barkin, one of Reb Berel's daughters, recalled telling her children when they were young how her father had been a partner at a multimillion-dollar enterprise but gave it all up because of Shabbos.

"You mean," asked one of her children, wide-eyed, "that he was a *tzad-dik*?"

For a while, Reb Berel had a hardware store. All along, his primary occupation, he told a cousin of his, was Torah.

The cousin, who gave his last name as Friedman, said at the *shivah* that Reb Berel told him that "after a day's work, when I come into yeshivah, I feel like a fish coming to water."

Childhood

The Williamsburg in which the young Yisroel Belsky grew up was an idyllic world of Jewish cosmopolitanism, in which people still reeling from the ravages of the Holocaust strove for spiritual greatness while disdaining the pursuit of extravagance, says Mrs. Barkin.

"Williamsburg was known as the Yerushalayim of America," she said. "It was truly exceptional."

The Belskys lived on the same block as their grandparents and cousins, with whom they played and attended yeshivah. The second oldest in a family of three boys and five girls, in a family of geniuses, Sruly's desire for knowledge stood out. He taught himself math, read encyclopedias in his spare time, taught himself several languages and read Homer's *The Iliad* at the age of five.

As a 10-year-old, Rav Belsky loved music so much that he considered a



career in the field. He was familiar with all types of music — "Play for me Tchaikovsky, 'Waltz of the Flowers,'" he once requested.

But his main love was learning. Though he was approved for a college scholarship — a rarity in those days, one reserved for the most dazzling reputations — he refused it. From when he entered Torah Vodaath in first grade as a five-year-old, he did not leave its shelter until his *petirah* Thursday at age 77.

"My mother," said Mrs. Malky Biegeleisen, one of Rav Belsky's sisters, "never made a big deal out of his brilliance. She would say, 'That's what the *Ribbono shel Olam* gave him.' But she was very, very proud that he refused the scholarship. She had the scholarship letter and the letter declining it in the drawer. When I was a little girl — he was much older than me — when my mother would clean for Pesach she would take it out and show it to us."

Torah Leadership

For the 72 years of his life from when he entered yeshivah, he dedicated himself to Torah, not content until he was conversant in all its pathways, both the well-trodden roads of *Bava Kamma* and *Kiddushin* and the more hidden corridors of *Kilayim* and *Keilim*. And his erudition was breathtakingly all encompassing.

Rabbi Nosson Scherman, a friend of Rav Belsky's from Bais Medrash Elyon, recalled Rav Belsky as a young *bachur* several years younger than himself who stood out primarily "for his *iluyishe* (brilliant) head," he said.

Rabbi Scherman, the general editor of ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications, frequently crossed paths with Rav Belsky, first as friends from yeshivah, then as staffers in Camp Agudah, and later when ArtScroll was producing an English-language set of *Shishah Sidrei Mishnah*.

"In *Maseches Keilim*," Rabbi Scherman recalled, "there are appliances [referred to] that don't exist anymore. What did they look like? [Rav Belsky] had worked on that. As a matter of fact, he had diagrams of all the *keilim*. When we were working on [*Mishnayos*] *Keilim*, he was very cooperative. He let us use his diagrams," and was available to answer questions.

Rabbi Scherman said that Rav Belsky would take the boys from Camp Agudah's Masmidim program canoing on the river, where he would point out animals and unusu-

Continued on page 8



Homegrown Gadlus

Continued from page 7
al plants.

In one *shiur* on how to check for insects in cabbage, Rav Belsky explained the details of what to look for and how to clean it. He then said that he developed a way that allows for quick cleaning while at the same time allows for “the best *holoptches*.”

He was fond of mentioning during *shiurim* which store allowed one to clean one’s own fish and which beans were best for the cholent.

In another *shiur* he was asked about which razors were permitted to shave with and which were forbidden. He began by emotionally talking about “the *tzurah* of a Yid,” with a beard. He then launched into a comprehensive discussion of how shavers work and which ones were permitted.

The message was clear. He gave a definitive *psak*, while also coating it with the proper *hashkafah*.

Rabbi Scherman could not say definitively, but imagined that Rav Belsky took his diverse base of knowledge from Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt”l*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Torah Vodaath and the man Rav Belsky considered his *rebbe muvhak*.

“For Rabbi Belsky,” he said, “if it was something with Torah, he had to know it.” He knew, he added, “complex things that few people work on and few people understand.”

Reconciling Science

As part of his research, Rav Belsky explored every single *maamar Chazal* that appears to contradict what modern science knows, and succeeded in explaining them.

“I have never come across a statement by *Chazal* that I did not understand, that was not fully compatible with everything that modern scien-

tists know about the human body,” he once insisted during a *shiur* for Irgun Shiurai Torah. “Not always is it a black-and-white, side-by-side comparison — they sometimes appear contradictory — but in the end, after an intensive look on the topic, they converge.”

For example, he said, the *Gemara* lists 30 bones in the hand, while scientists say there are only 27. The *Gemara*, Rav Belsky said, merely added three of the carpal bones that mutate during the formative years. Since they fuse together again shortly thereafter, science does not recognize them as separate.

“Using this example,” Rav Belsky said, “I have researched all 248 *eivarim*; although I did not yet discover all of them, I have come close enough to recognize the validity of the *Gemara*’s claim.”

Another apparent contradiction: The *Gemara* avers that the heart’s function is “understanding,” and the kidneys “advise.” Modern science has it that the heart pumps blood while the kidneys clean it.

Rav Belsky compared the two organs’ functions to an electric bulb. The bulb itself cannot light up a room — there are many of them on store shelves that do not emit any light — nor does the electric current provide any illumination. It is, rather, a combination of the two that join together at the flick of a switch to turn on the light.

The same is true here, says Rav Belsky. The brain, where the *neshamah* (i.e., wisdom) resides, needs many nutrients to function properly: oxygen, vitamins, minerals, etc. These are all transmitted through one medium, blood. The heart acts like a traffic controller, sending the blood through arteries, veins and pathways throughout the body, similar to an electric current. And the kidneys provide “advice”



Harav Belsky, *nasi* of Vaad Lehatzolas Nidchei Yisroel, in Tbilisi and Gori in the FSU Province of Georgia at a *chizuk* mission in December 2012.

to the blood, enhancing the heart’s “understanding.”

Just as when someone is in a dilemma, a good friend’s counsel allows him to regain his composure, the kidney’s advice relieves the difficulties that the blood encounters in its race through the human body. Impurities trickle in that hinder the nutrients in the blood from reaching their destinations and organs.

Additionally, Rav Belsky said, there are dozens of enzymes that power the body’s hormones, which are in turn controlled by a single adrenal (“ad” meaning “connected to”; “renal,” “of the kidney”; “adrenal”: “connected to the kidneys”) gland. The most famous of these enzymes is adrenaline. Adrenaline drips into the bloodstream when a person enters a dangerous circumstance. It allows him to run faster, jump higher, hit harder, etc.

This, Rav Belsky said, is all part of the kidney’s “advice” mechanism, aiding the brain in crisis resolution and providing the force necessary to carry out the brain’s commands.

Another seeming contradic-

tion is the *Gemara*’s differentiation between a *sheretz* and a *remmes*. A *sheretz* reproduces, while a *remmes* does not; scientists say that it is impossible.

Rav Belsky answered with a personal story.

“A long-time *kiruv* activist once told me excitedly that after 20 years, he had come up with an explanation to a difficult *Gemara*. Bothering him all those years was the *machlokes* of whether lice reproduce or not. He asked me, how can there be a difference of opinion in a fact of nature, particularly in this matter? Every mother knows of at least one horror tale concerning lice, and their obnoxious eggs called nits. They must be removed with creams and special combs.

“After so many years he found a solution, but he first wanted to hear my view. So I told him that since my teenage years, whenever I learned any of these types of *Gemaros* that supposedly conflict with science, I was never shaken up. I endeavored to reconcile them based on the premise

Continued on page 10



At the recent *chasunah* of his youngest son, Yaacov Binyomin, and Sara Rachel Jaffe on 3 Kislev.



Homegrown Gadlus

Continued from page 8

that our *Chachamim* knew about biology better than any scientist; our job is only to correctly comprehend their words.

"Indeed, I thought of a marvelous *pshat* that totally removes any misunderstandings, while actually being very simple.

"The literal connotation of reproduction is that the mother — either mammals bearing young or non-mammals laying eggs — gives all sustenance required for the fetus to be born or egg to hatch. The fetus receives its nourishment through the womb, while eggs are self-contained creatures having all the food needed to survive and grow, within its shell.

"One exception to this is the grouping called parasitic eggs. Parasitic eggs — of which the louse egg is the most famous — are eggs that do not get what they need to continue to exist and hatch from the mother; it must attach itself to a host animal or human and suck its blood, retrieving the vital nutrients needed to endure.

"It is thus quite reasonable," Rav Belsky told the man, "for there to be a difference of opinion if this can be termed reproduction."

"Do you know how I came to appreciate the significance of these *Gemaros*?" asked Rav Belsky rhetorically at the end of the *shiur*. "It was through my absolute conviction in the integrity of our *Chachamim*'s words, and my belief in the everlasting truth of the Torah."

Facets of Greatness

During his *beis medrash* years, Rav Belsky was selected to join an elite group of *bachurim* studying in Bais Medrash Elyon in Monsey.

"In those days, when I got mar-



ried," Rabbi Scherman said, "there were fewer than 50 *kollel yungeleit* in the whole United States. There was Bais Medrash Elyon and there was Lakewood. If you were there, for the most part, you had to be pretty good."

A roommate of Rav Belsky's recalled one incident that remains etched in his memory.

On Oct. 4, 1957, the Soviets shocked the world by sending up a rocket into space. The Sputnik program was a space marvel in which the power of physics overcame the natural inhibitions of gravity that governed Earth.

No one was more stunned than Rav Belsky, then a 20-year-old *bachur*. It was Erev Yom Kippur when the news broke. He went into his room, not coming out for a few hours until he was able to figure out the underlying mathematics that allowed the technological feat.

"He couldn't get over it, the fact that they were able to send a rocket into space," the roommate recalled.

Harav Shimon Susholtz, Rav of Bais Medrash Keren Orah in Kensington, learned in Bais Medrash Elyon at the same time as Rav Belsky, and the two eventually became close friends.

"The thing that stood out from that time was that he was known as a mathematical genius," said Rav Susholtz. "We knew that if we needed help in a *Mishnah* in *Kilayim* or something that we didn't understand, we went to him."

"He was a tremendously talented person," Rav Susholtz said. "The fact is that he had it all — *milah, shechitah, safrus, baal korei, baal tokeah, baal tefillah* — everything that you could do, he was able to do."

Rabbi Aryeh Schechter, a *sofer* from Boro Park, spent many Shabbasos in Rav Belsky's home as a young Torah Vodaath *talmid* from South America. He recalled that one Shavuos morning at the *seudah*, Rav Belsky told him that if someone were to begin any *passuk* in *Megillas Rus* he would be able to finish it, even in his sleep.

Several minutes later Rav Belsky, who had presumably been up the entire night, dozed off. Immediately, Rabbi Schechter opened a *Chumash* and started a *passuk*. In his sleep, Rav Belsky mumbled the rest of the *passuk*.

Rav Belsky was a *talmid* of Harav Reuven Grozovsky, *zt"l*, who guided the *bachurim* personally until he was

"The fact is that he had it all — *milah, shechitah, safrus, baal korei, baal tokeah, baal tefillah* — everything that you could do, he was able to do."

– Rav Susholtz

felled by a stroke. However, although he almost never attended *shiurim* by Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*, he considered him to be his *rebbe muvhak*.

Reb Yaakov's daughter and son-in-law, Harav Hirsch, *zt"l*, and, *ybl"e*, Mrs. Rivka Diskind, lived in Baltimore. Dorming with them was Miriam Berkowitz, whose father Dov Arye was the primary lay supporter of Harav Leizer Silver, *zt"l*, in all his endeavors in Cincinnati, Ohio. As Reb Yaakov visited often with the Diskinds, he suggested a *shidduch* with Miriam to his *talmid*, Rav Belsky.

The couple were married at the Gold Manor in Williamsburg. For each of the next seven days, the couple went around to the various Rebbes with whom Rav Belsky was close for *sheva brachos* — including the Satmar Rav, the Kopycztner Rebbe and the Klausenburger



Rebbe, *zechusam yagen aleinu*. He then learned for several years in *kol-lel* before embarking on a career of *harbotzas haTorah*.

Leadership Roles

As a *Maggid Shiur* in Torah Vodaath — he held several positions there before ascending to the post of *Rosh Yeshivah* five years ago — he was dedicated to his *talmidim's hatzlachah*. During a time when college was the norm, he actively encouraged them to devote their lives to Torah.

Rabbi Scherman, a former *Menahel* of Yeshiva Karlin Stolin in Boro Park, recalls meeting the parent of a former *talmid* and asking how his son was.

"He's learning under Rabbi Belsky," the parent responded. "And I have complaints about him."

The parent said that Rabbi Belsky had convinced his son not to go to college and to learn full time instead.

"But you have a college degree!" the astounded parent exclaimed.

When Rav Belsky replied that he had never gone to college, the parent exclaimed, "But you know everything! My son doesn't know all that."

He was stunned to hear that the *Rosh Yeshivah* had never actually gone to secular school, having gained all his knowledge from Torah, his inquisitive mind and voluminous reading.

State Senator Simcha Felder, a *talmid* of Torah Vodaath (although not of Rav Belsky), said he used to consult with him on various political and policy questions that cropped up from time to time.

While he preferred not to speak on the record about those conversations, Felder recalled the time about 15 years ago when copepods were discovered in New York City's water supply. Rav Belsky personally

"I don't do carpool," Rav Belsky said. "You provided me with the opportunity to do a *chessed*. Never in a million years would I have had the opportunity to do this *chessed*. And I thank you for that."

held that the bugs were too small to be seen by the naked eye and thus the water did not need filtering. But since most local Rabbanim disagreed, he became the expert the city consulted with.

Felder said he arranged for a visit from the Department of Environmental Protection with Rav Belsky, who explained what the problems were and discussed various solutions. (To this day, no solution has been found.)

"I felt he understood people and he understood the complications..." Felder said. "He had a working knowledge on any topic. Even though he was a brilliant person, he was a very compassionate, kind person."

"He was just so normal," Mrs. Bar-kin said.

"He was intimidating in his knowledge. But he wasn't intimidating in his personality," said Rabbi Moishe Shochet, director for devel-

opment at Torah Vodaath. "He didn't *pasken* the *din*, he *paskened* the person."

A doctor once asked Rav Belsky why Orthodox Jews have so many children.

"We're an endangered species," he replied.

Binyamin Jalkovsky, who runs a website, was running ads requesting readers — many of whom are not Jewish — to *daven* for Rav Belsky. He says that the incident that drew him close to the *Rosh Yeshivah* came about 30 years ago, when as a teenage camper he decided to go with friends on a late-night hike in the woods.

"As a teenager I was happy, care-free and irresponsible," he said. "I was working as a staff member at a camp. One Motzoei Shabbos my friends and I decided that since there was no oversight, we would go hiking on the mountains. We started off going from camp to camp gathering friends until we got to Camp Agudah. Over there we could not find any of our friends."

A passerby suggested they check one last place — the Masmidim dining room. Sure enough, his friends were there, having a *melaveh malkah* together with Rav Belsky.

"Rav Belsky smiled and acknowledged us, inviting us to wash and eat *melavah malkah*," Jalkovsky said. "In the meantime Rav Belsky said some Torah, and before we knew it, it was 1:30 in the morning. What should we do now? We were a group of five *bachurim* an hour's walk back to camp, and there were no car services in the area."

"Rav Belsky overheard us discussing what to do and asked what our plans were. We told him our dilemma. He said that he would drive us back to our camp — notwithstanding that he had absolutely no responsibility towards us."

"We were waiting, when will he

yell at us? When will he drop the bomb on us? That is what should happen."

Rav Belsky made small talk with the *bachurim* along the way, asking where they came from, until he pulled up at their camp. As they slid out of the car, he stopped them.

"I don't do carpool," Rav Belsky said. "You provided me with the opportunity to do a *chessed*. Never in a million years would I have had the opportunity to do this *chessed*. And I thank you for that."

And with that, he drove off, back to Camp Agudah.

Rabbi Shochet has a somewhat similar story. During the time about five years ago when his father was unconscious, he felt he was able to discuss with the *Rosh Yeshivah* life-and-death questions about DNR orders and at the same time about listening to music as an *avel*.

"I found a person you were able to go to about anything and everything," said Rabbi Shochet. "I went to him like the lady who goes to the Rav to know about her chicken. Not only about *Chumash* and *Halachah* and *Shulchan Aruch* and *Shas* and *Poskim*, but also about the stars and the moon and the solar system."

Mrs. Sarah Bald, who together with her husband Rabbi Mordechai Shlomo Bald leads the Jewish community in Lvov, Ukraine, said that for about 15 years she has been calling Rav Belsky for every problem she had, from personal *she'eilos* to community affairs. He even gave her his cellphone number.

When she heard several weeks ago that he was sick, she saved a list of questions to ask "when he's feeling well."

She did not realize how busy the *Rosh Yeshivah* had been until she read about him after his *petirah*.

"Now that I'm learning about who

Continued on page 12



Homegrown Gadlus

Continued from page 11

Rabbi Belsky was, I see how lucky I was to get such a direct line," she said.

Rav Belsky's involvement with Yidden from the former Soviet Union culminated in a trip four years ago to Azerbaijan and Georgia, a trip made all the more poignant by his medical crisis the year before. He was also instrumental in founding Be'er Hagolah, a Brooklyn yeshivah for children of Russian immigrants.

When Russia's Jews first started coming to the U.S. en masse in the early 1990s — following a 20-year struggle to grant them freedom to emigrate — there was widespread disappointment among the Jewish community in their unwillingness to immediately embrace a Torah lifestyle.

Rav Belsky addressed that in an Agudath Israel convention at the time.

"I'll tell you what people expected," he told convention-goers, which he repeated in an interview with *Hamodia* four years ago. "They expected like this: There is going to be a big boat that will come to the dock, and there will be 1,000 Russian families inside the boat. They will all come, and our Yidden will

all come to the dock to accept them. They'll walk off the boat, and there will be a fiddler who will play the whole time. They'll come closer to us and they'll say, 'Rebbi, teach us Torah!'"

"We will answer them, 'alef,' and they'll say 'alef,' and then 'beis,' and they'll say 'beis.' We'll fall on their shoulders and then they will fall on our shoulders."

"Why are they at fault that you imagined a childish fantasy?" Rav Belsky concluded his address to a minutes-long standing ovation.

In the last two decades, Rav Belsky gradually became known as a recognized *Posek* across the world. His sure way of giving a *psak*, combined with his authoritative knowledge of the material, made him the final say for so many questions.

Rav Susholtz said that he often wondered when his friend went from being a genius to a world *Gadol*.

"It is something that I thought about," Rav Susholtz admitted. "And I can't put my finger on it."

Rabbi Yitzchok Gottdiener, the administrator of Torah Vodaath, said that in his 30 years working closely with Rav Belsky, three things stand out: He always went with the truth, loved his *talmidim* to a fault, and would go to extreme lengths to avoid *machlokes*.

"If there is one lesson that the *Rosh Yeshivah* taught me," Rabbi Gottdiener said, "[it is this:] He once told me, 'If you tell the truth it's the easiest thing because you don't have to keep track of what you told people.'"

"When he was approached about a problem, he would try every which way that the problem should be resolved without getting into *machlokes*," Rabbi Gottdiener said. "He would give in, he would try to give more money, he would try to get the person more help — everything not to create a fight."

"And he had such *ahavah* for his *talmidim* — a *talmid* could do no wrong in his eyes," he said. "He was known to always take the losing side. He was a champion for the underdog. For a *talmid* he took it to the nth degree."

Rav Belsky suffered a near-shutdown of his organs exactly four years ago, on *Shabbos Parashas Yisro*. He told *Hamodia* that he had not realized how bad the situation had been at the time — his esophagus was ripped open entirely, and the digestive juices were pouring out onto his heart and lungs, shutting down his system.

"The doctors told me that they never saw a person in that situation who survived," he said. "One doctor

said — he was an older person and very cynical — he said that he was born in an irreligious home and he never dreamed of having any religion [in his life]. But when he looks at me he can see that there is a *Borei Olam*."

Upon his recovery, which he termed miraculous, Rav Belsky dedicated his new lease on life to restoring the yeshivah begun by his grandfather a century ago to its former glory.

Indeed, says Rabbi Gottdiener, the growth the yeshivah saw these past four years was tremendous, "a bigger spurt than any in a long time," he said.

Over the past year, Rav Belsky would tearfully relate, many times, the story of how his grandfather begged the board to open Torah Vodaath when there were too few *talmidim*.

"You get a feeling that if the *Eibishter* did *nissim* supernaturally — I'm not here just to eat and drink. There is a reason," Rav Belsky said.

Just before the plane carrying the *aron* lifted off from John F. Kennedy International Airport on Motzoei Shabbos, Rabbi Gottdiener asked *mechilah* in the name of the board of directors and "pledged to bring Torah Vodaath back to its previous glory — all with *shalom*."

Harav Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, *Rebbi of Rebbeim*

RABBI YITZCHOK GOTTDIENER

Executive Director, Yeshiva Torah Vodaath

It is almost impossible to gather our thoughts and put pen to paper after receiving such a devastating blow. The *Rosh Yeshivah* loved every *talmid* in the Yeshivah. No one escaped notice.

Recently the *menahelim*, *mechanchim* and *Roshei Yeshivah* were *zocheh* to spend a Shabbos away, together with our *Rosh Yeshivah*. I believe that the *divrei chizuk* that the *Rosh Yeshivah* delivered speaks volumes about how Moreinu Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, lived his life.

What follows is a transcript of what the *Rosh Hayeshivah* said (on Shabbos), transcribed by Rabbi Moshe Shochet:

"A *rebbe* has to do more than love every *talmid* (even the difficult ones). He has to also believe in each and every one of his *talmidim*. Even if the *talmid* does not believe in himself, when he sees the *rebbe* believing in him, it will give him a healthy self-esteem to begin believing in himself.

"A *rebbe* has to see potential *kochos* and *kishronos* in a child. Even if the student resists your efforts, don't give up on anyone.

"It may just possibly be that *talmidim* who are not *matzliach* [are that way] because in the past a parent, *rebbe* or friend was too cynical with him and told him that he wouldn't amount to anything. A *talmid* may not even realize what inner abilities he possesses and never knew existed. As a *rebbe*, you can bring that out of him, and your efforts never go to waste. Years later, you may be surprised and see him grow up, *iy"H*, into a *talmid chacham*.

"If you believe in your *talmidim*, then they'll see themselves in a dif-



ferent light. A *rebbe* should never be angry at a *talmid*. Outwardly, he can show that he's upset with him, but never in his inner heart. You can't be jealous of a *talmid*; in fact, a *talmid* is supposed to "*shteig*" to become more than the *rebbe*."

The *Rosh Yeshivah* was very open when he told everyone that in all his 50 years of teaching he never hated a *talmid*; just the opposite — he loved each and every one.

Moreinu Harav Belsky touched the lives of thousands of people. He was a devoted husband, father,

grandfather and a person to whom thousands turned for advice, direction and understanding. *Klal Yisrael* lost an exceptional *talmid chacham*, who was filled with *ahavas Yisrael*. We at Torah Vodaath lost our leader, whose drive to build the Yeshi-

vah, which was founded by his *zeide*, Reb Binyomin Wilhelm, *zt"l*, was an inspiration.

May Hashem Yisborach watch over his beautiful family, the *talmidim* and all of us who loved and respected this special individual.



"Parnassah Network is the need of our generation," said Rav Belsky, *zt"l*, especially when it comes to *parnassah* resources for *yungeleit* transitioning from *kollel* to the workforce. He added that "since our community and its successful business infrastructure are infinitely larger than they were in my grandfather's days, the potential success of a community-based *parnassah* network is so much greater." Rav Belsky spoke of how, unfortunately, today's "quick buck" culture causes people to overlook proper *Halachah* and ethics, and sometimes ensnares them in legal troubles too. "Reb Dovid's vision of a kosher, honorable source of livelihood for the Torah public provides a program for proper guidance," the *Rosh Yeshivah* concluded. "Reb Dovid Honig, *ashrei chelkecha*."

Rav Belsky's Unique Contributions to the World of *Kashrus* at the Orthodox Union

RAFAEL HOFFMAN

The Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos* says “*ehav es hamalachah u’sena es harabbanus*.” Simply translated, that means one should love labor and hate ‘rabbanus’ — positions of honor. Despite its more general application in this instance, Chazal’s choice of the term ‘rabbanus,’ typically used to refer to the rabbinate — to which we are commanded to accord the greatest honor — certainly begs explanation.

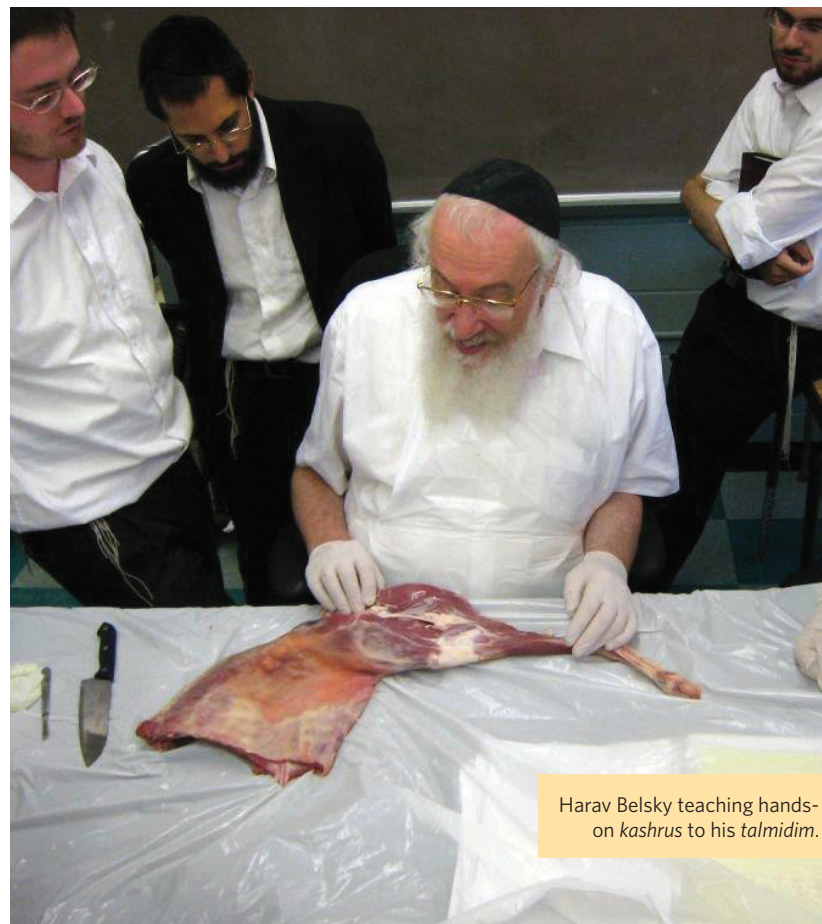
Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt”l*, offered the following explanation. The institution of the rabbanus has two components. The first is alluded to at the beginning of the Mishnah itself, the duty of the Rav to “roll up his sleeves,” so to speak, and deal hands-on with the issues facing those in his flock. This aspect, he affirmed, should be cherished and embraced. The second element is that of the honor attached to rabbanus, which indeed should hold no value to those who occupy positions of leadership in Klal Yisrael.

“He always wanted us to remember that our jobs are not supposed to be easy, and it was a lesson that he taught by example,” said Rabbi Moshe Elefant, COO of OU Kashrus, who worked closely with Rav Belsky for decades. “His involvement had a powerful effect on the OU and on kashrus worldwide.”

In our conversation with Rabbi Elefant, he gave us an understanding of how Rav Belsky’s leading role in the Orthodox Union synthesized his singular capabilities in a way that raised the standards not only of the organization’s own supervision but, through it, *kashrus* worldwide.

One small illustration he offered was the “amazing story” of Rav Belsky’s role in re-introducing the production of venison to the kosher market. Several years ago, the OU was contacted by an individual who owned a deer farm and was interested in producing kosher venison for the market. Besides the sheer novelty of the idea, the offer raised an interesting question. It is the *minhag* of Ashkenazim not to use any part of the hindquarter of an animal due to the complexity of identifying and extracting the fats and sinews — forbidden by Torah prohibition — that are found there.

In a deer, a *chayah* or wild animal, which is not subject to the same level of prohibitions, Rabbanim were doubtful whether the same custom applied. When presented



with the issue, Harav Elyashiv, *zt”l*, ruled that they are not included in this *minhag* and meat from the back sections could indeed be extracted

using the complicated technique of *nikur* (deveining or *treiboring* the animal).

One problem remained. No one

could be found who had ever performed *nikur* on a deer. How was it to be done? Rav Belsky was undeterred. First, he consulted and observed several leading Sephardic *menakrim* (those who perform *nikur*) who do perform the process on hindquarters of animals. Next, he *shecht*ed several deer, and with a set of surgical scalpels experimented and developed a procedure.

Subsequently, Rav Belsky encountered an elderly *menaker* in Eretz Yisrael who told him that he himself had been *menaker* deer in Poland before the War. After discussing the technique, they found that the approach developed was in line with the procedure recently “developed,” with the exception of certain stringencies that Rav Belsky had added.

In all aspects of his irreplaceable position among *Gedolei Yisrael*, Rav Belsky was famous for his “hands-on” approach. Uniquely gifted with a mind that made him a master, not only of all facets of Torah, but also of technology, the sciences, history, and a gamut of worldly knowledge, those who were privileged to spend time with him in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, Camp Agudah, or any one of the many other endeavors that he threw himself into, have countless illustrations of this point.

Perhaps the forum in which this facet of his personality came most clearly to the fore was in his roughly 30 years of service as an official *Posek* for the Orthodox Union’s *kashrus* division.

“He always wanted us to remember that our jobs are not supposed to be easy, and it was a lesson that he taught by example,” said Rabbi Moshe Elefant, COO of OU Kashrus, who worked closely with the *Rosh Yeshivah* for decades. “His involvement had a powerful effect on the OU and on *kashrus* worldwide.”

Rav Belsky’s involvement with the OU began while the organization was in the midst of the first stage of the exponential growth that would make it the world’s largest *kashrus* organization. As it brought company after company under its supervision, there were many choices to make that would set longstanding precedents and determine where it would set the bar of its standards.

“When Rav Belsky came we were at a crossroads, and he encouraged us to go into it, totally *l’shem Shamayim*,” said Rabbi Elefant. “He wasn’t a *meikil* or a *machmir*, he was an *ish emes* and when he thought something was permissible or forbidden he said it without thinking about the politics.”

One approach that played a cru-

cial role in establishing the OU's reputation was Rav Belsky's insistence on not relying on the status quo as the best that could be done. He insisted that the operations of all companies under the organization's supervision be constantly reviewed and evaluated anew to see if there were any possibility to resolve difficult issues in a better way. No matter how long a practice had been in place, Rav Belsky was undeterred in initiating any change that he felt would raise the quality of the product's *kashrus*.

Particularly in his early years, he made frequent visits to facilities. Rav Belsky strongly believed that in order to fully grasp the nature of the *she'eilos* posed to him, and to ensure the implementation of the standards set by the OU, it was necessary for the leading Rabbanim themselves to see the technical operations in person.

Rav Belsky's phenomenal capability to grasp and integrate technical knowledge with his deep understanding of the relevant *halachos* never ceased to astound those who joined him for visits to production sites. In his quest to fully understand the physical reality of each issue the OU confronted, he often spent time probing those who were most intimately connected with the processes in question.

This displayed not only Rav Belsky's quick mastery of subjects of which he had merely made brief observations, but his knack for speaking to all individuals in "their language." Whether conversing with the chemist who had designed complex ingredients or the operator of the conveyor belt of a factory, he was a master at relating to individuals on their terms and gleaned an accurate report of the information he sought.

"There has been a lot of talk of how Rav Belsky knew *kol haTorah kulah*. What not everybody realizes is that he also knew how to *do kol haTorah kulah*," said Rabbi Elephant.

When Rav Belsky visited a slaughterhouse, he was rarely satisfied with observation, but would typically *shecht* a certain num-

ber of animals himself. His applied knowledge, particularly in this area, made him central in developing the 90-page book of protocol for *shochtim* working under the OU's auspices.

It seemed that no matter what challenges presented themselves, Rav Belsky's brilliance and ingenuity bore some solution. A few years ago, the OU dealt with

the issue of various cooking oils that could possibly have been transported in the tanks of ships and trucks that had contained non-kosher liquids. Rav Belsky visited boats at the dock, studied diagrams and used his uncanny aptitude at mathematics to determine where and how the organization could ensure that any impermissible taste

had become *batel* (halachically nullified).

The OU offices, located in the heart of the Wall Street district, were heavily affected by the 9/11 attacks. Many witnessed the horrible tragedy firsthand, and it took two weeks before employees could return to their facilities. Rav Belsky, who visited the office weekly to answer *she'eilos*,

addressed the still shaken staff.

"He said that there are some events that are of such magnitude that, after they occur, the world becomes a different world and that is how one must look at it," recalled Rabbi Elephant. "It may sound dramatic, but I truly feel that the world without Rav Belsky is a different world."



נפלה עטרת ראשנו אוי נא לנו כי חטאנו

בצער רב ויגון קודר מבכים אנו פטירתו של האי אדם גדול בענקים שהיה מפורסם בכל קצוי תבל בגודל כח תורתו עד להפליא, המאור הגדול לממשלת התורה ולומדיה, גאון עצום בכל מכמני התורה, כל רז לא אניס ליה, מגדולי פוסקי דורינו, איש נבון וחכם מלא מדע וחכמתא, מקרבניטי היהדות ומנהיגיה, רבים השיב מעון והחזיר אחינו בני ישראל לאבינו שבשמים, גדול כים שברינו על שבר בת עמינו, מי יורה דעה ומי יבין שמועה, הוי מי יתן לנו תמורתו

ה"ה הגאון הגדול המפורסם מפוסקי הדור והדרו

חיים ישראל בעלסקי
מרן רבי ראש ישיבת תורת ודעת

אשר עמד בראש מפעלנו "מפעל תורה ודעת - תפארת בנימין" מיום הווסדה עד הנה והוא אשר עידד ופקד וצוה כבוד העסקנים הדגולים בקיום והרחבת גבולי מפעלנו וכן זכינו שבמשך כל השנים היה לנו למורה דרך ונהג בנו טובת עין באופן פרטי והעניק אותנו מאוצרו הטוב בעצה ותושיה על כל צעד ושעל

ועתה אהה עלינו עד מאוד בהלקח מאתנו
רוח אפינו אשר אמרנו בצלו נחיה
אוי לה לספינה שאבדה קרבניטה!

המנחם ציון וירושלים הוא ינחם אותנו ואת כל משפחתו הרוממה על האבירה הגדולה שאבדנו, ויה"ר שלא ישמע עוד שוד ושבר וצער בגבולינו, ויושר יליץ ממרומים על עדת צאן מרעיתו ועל כל הנלווים אליו, ונוכה בקרוב בימינו לביאת משיח צדקינו ויקיצו וירננו שוכני עפר בב"א

החותמים מתוך צער רב

הנהלת מפעל תורה ודעת - תפארת בנימין

Working to Find *Emes* and Restore *Shalom*

RAFAEL HOFFMAN

About 25 years ago, sensing the need to ensure that *dinei Torah* in America would be carried out on the highest level of integrity, Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, formed a *beis din*, chiefly comprised of *talmidim* who had learned under his watchful eye at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath's *Choshen Mishpat kollel*.

"He went into *dinei Torah l'shem Shamayim*," said Rabbi Moshe Bergman, who served together with Rav Belsky on the *beis din* for many years. "He worked without *negios* [self-interest], and if he felt someone was wronged, he would go any distance to help them. He was concerned with *din emes l'amito* even if his decision was the unpopular one."

Rav Belsky consistently pushed away all side considerations, using his mastery of *Choshen Mishpat* and singular ability to grasp situations to seek what the true approach of the Torah should be in each of the difficult cases presented to him.

According to *Halachah*, a *Dayan* is owed payment for his time. However, even this small profit from his involvement in *dinei Torah* did not make its way to the Belsky family. Any money that Rav Belsky received in connection with his work for the *beis din* was given to *tzedakah*.

In many instances, those who came with cases were themselves in very difficult financial positions. On many occasions, he would tell litigants to borrow from local *gemachim* on his own account, using his wages from the *beis din* to repay the debt.

"He didn't just know the *halachah* perfectly, he also had an amazing grasp of the *sugyos b'iyun* [in depth], coupled with a clear understanding of the practical business world along with his keen understanding of people," said Rabbi Bergman. "This unique combination made him able to deal with *dinei Torah*."

Even when dealing intimately with the practical aspects of a case, Rav Belsky did not allow himself to be confined merely to the role of a *Dayan*. On countless occasions, he worked tirelessly not only

to resolve the issue at hand according to *Shulchan Aruch*, but to do whatever he could to help the parties involved.

Once, he sat with his *beis din* for hours with a couple in the process of negotiating the terms of a *get*, *R"l*. He and the other *Dayanim* worked tirelessly to arrive at a fair and halachic division of the family's assets.

Later that same night, one of the other *Dayanim* walked into the Belsky home to discuss a matter with him, only to find the same husband and wife sitting with him as he did all that he could to restore their *shalom bayis* and prevent the destruction of their marriage.

Rav Belsky's brilliant mind enabled him to quickly sum up complicated cases, synthesizing the facts with his phenomenal clarity in Torah. What is perhaps even more remarkable, however, is that even while immersed in the technical process of the most intricate *dinei Torah*, his caring heart did not lose sight of the lives of those who walked through the *beis din's* doors.



Introducing a *kiruv* camper of Camp Agudah to the Bluzhever Rebbe, *zy"ta*.



Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, greeting Rav Belsky at a YTV *melaveh malkah* in 2014.



With Rav Elya Katz, *shlita*



At the *shivah* for Rebbetzin Esther Epstein, *a"h*, seated next to the Skverer Rebbe, *shlita*, being *menachem avei* Rav Yaakov Bender and, *lbc'l"c*, Harav Chaim Epstein, *zt"l*.

Rebbi in Torah, Rebbi in Middos

RABBI SHIMON FINKELMAN

In the 1960s, my parents, *z"l*, purchased a house in the Kensington section of Brooklyn. They did so because my father had learned at Mesivta Torah Vodaath and he wanted us to be near the Mesivta's present building on East Ninth Street, which was then under construction. At that time, there were but a handful of *frum* families in the predominantly Italian neighborhood.

Rav Belsky, then a twelfth-grade *rebbe* at the Mesivta, also purchased his home on East Seventh Street around that time. My brothers and I attended Torah Vodaath and, when the new building opened, we *davened* there every Shabbos. The small but growing community grew very close. For a number of years, on Simchas Torah, the *bachurim* would dance from the yeshivah to Rav Belsky's house for the first course of their *seudah*, then proceed to the home of Rabbi Avrohom Talansky, *z"l*, the yeshivah's dormitory supervisor, for the next course; then to our home for the third course, and finally to the home of Rav Belsky's brother-in-law and sister, Rabbi and Mrs. Yitzchok Eichenthal, for dessert.

The *yahrtzeit* of my father, 21 Menachem Av, falls during the camp season. Following *Shacharis* on that day in the Masmidim *beis medrash* of Camp Agudah, I would put out *tikkun* (cake and drinks) for everyone to partake of. People are busy, and I am always grateful to those who take the minute or two to take something and wish "*l'chaim*." Rav Belsky, though he was an incredibly busy person, did more. After the *l'chaim* he would sit with me and the *bachurim*, and speak about my father, relate that our fathers had been *chavrusos* (in their retirement, when they were neighbors), and reminisce about the Kensington neighborhood in which our families had been "pioneers." This is but one example of the sterling *middos* of this unique individual.

Inside His Classroom

As young *bachurim* in the *mesivta*, we revered Rav Belsky. Everyone knew that in addition to his vast Torah knowledge, he was also an expert in astronomy and the other sciences. How excited we were when we became his *talmidim* in



At a *hachnasas sefer Torah* in Camp Agudah in 2001 (L-R): Harav Belsky; *ybl"c*, Rabbi Simcha Kaufman, Rabbi Naftali Basch, Harav Uren Reich.



Harav Yaakov Teitelbaum, *zt"l*, in Camp Agudah circa 1958. After his *petirah*, his *talmid muvhak*, Harav Yisroel Belsky, became the camp Rav.

twelfth grade.

Our reverence for him only grew as we sat in his classroom. To encourage us to come on time each morning, he would begin with a half-hour *shiur* in a topic that was sure to pique our interest. For part of the year, it was the Rambam's Introduction to *Seder Zera'im*. After that, it was a fascinating introduction to Jewish history. It seemed

us that there was no area of knowledge in which our *rebbe* was not well versed.

Many years later, I met a college student who had come to Brooklyn for Shabbos with a friend. When I asked who had hosted him, he replied, "We ate the daytime meal at Rabbi Belsky's."

"It must have been fascinating," I responded.

"Oh, yes," the young man replied. "My friend is majoring in zoology, and Rabbi Belsky knew everything there is to know on the topic."

One of Rav Belsky's sons said at the *levayah* that his father was always immersed in his precious *sefarim*, constantly attached to the Torah *hakedoshah*. Somehow, this brilliant man was also able to amass an incredible amount of knowledge in other areas of wisdom that relate to Torah.

We discovered that our *rebbe* was not only a *Gaon*, but also an amazingly talented person. He sang beautifully, was an outstanding *baal tefillah* and *baal kriah*, a *mohel* and a *shochet*, to mention just some of his skills.

Matzah Baking

Two years after I was in his *shiur*, Rav Belsky arranged for a group of us 18-year-olds to form a *chaburah* for matzah baking before Pesach, which he would lead and supervise. We were not going to stand in the bakery and watch the workers do their work, as *chaburos* commonly do. Rav Belsky wanted us to do everything, from mixing the dough to rolling it and bringing it to the oven. Only the *shiber*, the man responsible for putting the matzos into the oven and taking them out, would be hired. (This is an extremely difficult task that requires, among other things, an eye for knowing exactly when the matzah is ready to be removed from the oven and how to remove it without breaking it.)

In preparation for this exciting

venture, our *rebbe* took us downstairs to the yeshivah's dining room, made a dough, which he divided among us, and proceeded to show us how to roll the dough into a round, even matzah.

Before we left for the bakery, everyone was assigned a specific job. I was to be a *velgerer* — one who rolls the dough into a matzah. In the bakery, however, I did a terrible job. My matzos came out in every shape and size, but I was too proud (or embarrassed) to admit it.

As Rav Belsky made his way around the bakery, making sure that everything was running smoothly, he passed by my spot and noticed my handiwork. He whispered to me, "Maybe you should give someone else a chance." I switched places with someone who had been cleaning sticks.

A year later, as Pesach approached, Rav Belsky again took us down to the dining room for practice. Once again, I was made a *velgerer*. *Baruch Hashem*, this time my matzos were fairly good. When Rav Belsky passed my spot, he whispered to me, "I see that you've gotten much better." I never forgot that moment because I was amazed that my *rebbe* had remembered my difficulties a year earlier and that he made a point of boosting my confidence and making me feel good.

So Great, So Humble

In *Parashas Yisro*, the *parashah* of the week in which Rav Belsky left this world, Yisro enumerates the qualities of a *shofet* (court judge) in *Klal Yisrael*. Rav Belsky epitomized these qualities:

- *Anshei chayil*, which according to Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, *zt"l*, means to be a capable person. As mentioned, Rav Belsky was unusually talented. In no area was he more skilled than in *psak Halachah*, where he utilized his knowledge of *kol haTorah kulah* to render *piskei Halachah* in the most complex questions, in all four sections of *Shulchan Aruch*.

Every weekday morning in Camp Agudah, Rabbi Michoel Levy of Camp Chedvah delivers a well-prepared *shiur* in *Halachah* following *Shacharis*. When Rabbi Levy would conclude the *shiur*, everyone would watch to see if Rav Belsky had something to say to him. If he did, a crowd would form and listen with rapt attention as, with his vast *yedios* and amazing clarity, he would expound upon what had just been said.

- *Yirei Elokim*. One could gain *yiras Shamayim* just from observing Rav Belsky as he recited *Shema* or answered *Yehei Shemei Rabbah*.

- *Anshei emes*. Rav Belsky was the ultimate man of truth, never afraid to express what he determined to



Harav Belsky (C) speaking at the Camp Agudah banquet, end of summer 2005 (seated, L-R): Rabbi Naftali Basch, *lbc"l*, Rabbi Boruch Borchardt, *z"l*, and, *ybl"l*, Rabbi Dovid Katzenstein.

be the *halachah* even when he knew that it might not be popular.

- *Sonei batza* (those who despise money). As expressed so eloquently by his sons at the *levayah*, to Rav Belsky, money was nothing more than a means through which to perform *mitzvos*, especially *mitzvos bein adam lachaveiro*. He lived a very simple life, but spent lavishly on *hachnasas orchim* and dispensed *tzedakah* far beyond his means.

In his famous *Iggeres* (Letter) to his son, the Ramban writes that humility is "the finest of all admirable traits. Through humility, the fear of Hashem will intensify in your heart. ..."

Rav Belsky was a *Gaon baTorah*, a great *Rosh Yeshivah*, a *rebbe* of scores of *talmidim*, one of the greatest experts in the field of *kashrus*, a multi-talented individual. Yet, I never met a sweeter, friendlier person. He was extremely approachable, very easy to talk to.

In Camp Agudah, where he served as *Mara d'Asra* since 1969 (upon the passing of Harav Yaakov Teitelbaum, *zt"l*), Rav Belsky would lead *seudah shelishis* for the *Masmidim* and *rebbeim*, while the campers had their *seudah shelishis* in the main dining room.

We would watch as individual campers of all ages would come over to Rav Belsky with their boxes of cereal, asking, "What *brachah* do I make on this?" "...Is this kosher?"

Rav Belsky gave each child the attention he needed and spoke to him in a way that encouraged the boy to come back again when there was another question he needed to ask.

As mentioned earlier, Rav Belsky was an extremely busy person. It was not for naught that for the past

decade he had a most devoted *gab-bai*, Rabbi Yitzchok Dov Greenberg, *ybl"l*, who arranged his daily schedule of appointments and was at his side to assist him in every way. The phone in Rav Belsky's office was constantly ringing with calls for advice, questions in *Halachah* and important issues facing individuals and *Klal Yisrael*.

Yet, it was obvious from observing him that his focus in camp was on his beloved *Masmidim*, the *bachurim* who were devoting much of their summer days to *limud haTorah* under his guidance. He would learn *Halachah* with them after *Shacharis*, deliver a *shiur* to the oldest ones before lunch, teach them *niggunim* every Thursday night around a campfire, and take them on a "tour of the galaxies" — he would walk with them to an open area where he pointed out the various stars and constellations.

And then there were the special trips: hiking, Niagara Falls and other places of interest, where the *bachurim* could enjoy themselves and, at the same time, be shown the *niflaos haBorei*. Rav Belsky exerted himself to accompany the *Masmidim* on these trips because it was an opportunity to teach what cannot be taught in the classroom, and because he loved the *bachurim* with an *ahavas nefesh* and wanted to spend time with them. The love he showered upon them in those few weeks created a bond that lasted a lifetime.

The Four-Year Gift

Exactly four years before his passing, on 19 Shevat 5772, Rav Belsky was rushed to the hospital in very serious condition and, as

it was soon discovered, in need of emergency surgery. But minutes after being wheeled into the operating room, he suffered cardiac arrest, making surgery impossible.

Two years later, I sat in Rav Belsky's camp office as, with tears in his eyes, he related what had happened that night before the heart attack.

A surgeon had been summoned to the operating room to perform the surgery and was on his way there. Meanwhile, the family was being pressured to transfer the *Rosh Yeshivah* to a prestigious Manhattan hospital, where a renowned surgeon was prepared to take on the case.

When the suggestion was made to Rav Belsky, he mulled it over and then shook his head. No, they must not move him. Why not? As he later put it, "I was not going to embarrass that doctor — who ultimately saved my life."

Had Rav Belsky suffered cardiac arrest on the way to Manhattan, he might not have survived.

His recovery was clearly miraculous. A doctor familiar with the case said that, statistically, the chances were virtually nonexistent of someone in that condition having a full medical recovery.

Rav Belsky spent many weeks in the hospital, followed by weeks of physical rehabilitation at a facility in West Orange, New Jersey. When he returned home, the joy among his family, and his extended families at Mesivta Torah Vodaath, Camp Agudah, and elsewhere, was indescribable.

I will never forget the first Friday night of that camp season. Rav Belsky came to camp with a walker, a wheelchair and a cane. His mind was perfect, but his body was still recovering. His mood was upbeat and his heart was overflowing with gratitude.

At the *seudas Shabbos* that Friday night in the camp's dining room for married staff, he was emotional as he expressed his gratitude to Hashem. Moments later, following the main course, he rose — as he always did — to join his beloved *Masmidim* in their dining room for *zemiro*s. As he rose, the men in our dining room also rose — as we always did when we saw Rav Belsky getting up from his seat. But this time we sang *Ki Orech Yamim ...* as we escorted him to the *Masmidim* dining room. To say that our hearts were bursting with joy is an understatement.

These past four summers, Rav Belsky was like his old self — and perhaps even more — teaching, singing, *leining* and inspiring by his mere presence. Now our hearts are broken. May his memory inspire us forever, and may he serve as a *meilitz yosher* from his exalted place in *Shamayim* for all of *Klal Yisrael*.

A Heart Overflowing With *Ahavas Yisrael*

RABBI AVRAHAM Y. HESCHEL

For much of the Torah world, Hagaon Harav Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, was a towering, awe-inspiring figure, a halachic giant and very powerful personality. For those of us who merited to bask in his presence, he was all this and so much more. For what we saw from up close was not only his incredible brilliance in all areas of Torah, but a heart that overflowed with genuine *ahavas Yisrael*.

While I learned only briefly in his *shiur*, I had the *zechus* to have numerous interactions with the *Rosh Yeshivah*, *zt"l*, and each time I spoke with him, I walked away inspired and enriched.

The first complex *she'eilah* I posed to Rav Belsky was about a 99-year-old woman who was in a hospital in serious condition. Her immediate family had instructed the doctors not to put her on life support, and members of her extended family asked me to find out whether this was halachically appropriate.

As I told him the background of the case, I mentioned to him that the woman, who was fully conscious, had lost her will to live.

While I don't recall the precise details of the *psak* he gave me — which was based on the specific circumstances — I vividly recall his enormous anguish at the notion that a Jew, even at this advanced age, had lost the will to live.

As he instructed me what to tell the family, he stressed repeatedly the importance of stressing that whatever time the patient had left in the world, it should be with an appreciation of and a *cheshek* for life.

Rav Belsky's *ahavas Yisrael* manifested itself in many ways.

One Chol Hamoed Sukkos, I attended his famed *She'eilos U'teshuvos shiur* in Flatbush. For some two hours, he took questions on all four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch*, and expounding in depth on numerous *sugyas* in *Shas*. After the conclusion of the *shiur*, along with many of the participants, I stood on line to say a *Gutten Moed* and a *yasher koach* to Rav Belsky.

As my turn came, the *Rosh Yeshivah* replied to me by saying, "*Yasher koach* to you for your article on Rav Quinn."

It took me a minute to realize what he was referring to. Then I recalled that some six weeks earlier, *Hamodia* had published a *chinuch* supplement and included an article I had written about the approach to *chinuch* of my *rebbe*, Harav Nesanel Quinn, *zt"l*.

I stood there amazed. Over the previous six weeks, Rav Belsky had



Simchas Purim with talmidim

given numerous *shiurim* on a wide range of subjects, answered hundreds of weighty *she'eilos*, presided over *dinei Torah*, and served as *shaliach tzibbur* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Yet he remembered an article I had written, in order to give *chizuk* to a relatively new writer!

Indeed, the comment gave me much *chizuk* to continue writing hashkafic articles. Over the years to come, almost every time I met the *Rosh Yeshivah*, he would give me words of encouragement about my articles in *Hamodia*.

Incidentally, though Rav Quinn — whose humility was legendary — showed great respect for every person, and subservience to every *talmid chacham*, the awe and reverence Rav Quinn showed toward Rav Belsky was extraordinary. On numerous occasions Rav Quinn told me that Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*, had called Rav Belsky an "*ish ha'eshkolos*," and though he was nearly three decades older, and himself very knowledgeable in all facets of all *Halachah*, he would ask Rav Belsky *she'eilos* and relate *psakim* in his name.

When Rav Quinn's closest friend and longtime *chavrusa*, Reb Shmuel Wilhelm, *z"l*, was *niftar*, Rav Quinn asked me to put up a sign about the *hespeidim* to be held on the *sheloshim*. The two speakers scheduled were Rav Quinn and Rav Belsky. I made a sign stating "Harav Nesanel Quinn and Harav Yisroel Belsky will be *maspid*."

Several hours after the sign went up, I met Rav Quinn in the hallway. His face, which was always



Yeshiva Torah Vodaath
Shabbos Hisachdus

wreathed in a smile, was very serious.

"You embarrassed me in front of the whole yeshivah!" he told me.

"What is *Rebbi* referring to?" I asked, baffled.

"On the sign you put my name before Rav Belsky's," Rav Quinn replied.

"But *Rebbi* is much older than Rav Belsky!" I replied.

"The *Gemara* says that at a *seudah*, the priority of seating is according to age. The *Gemara* does not mention anything about a sign!" Rav Quinn countered. "Only if you

promise me never to do such a thing again will I forgive you."

Left without a choice, I promised, thinking to myself that I would leave future signs for others to write.

Later that day, I approached Rav Belsky and related what had occurred.

He looked me in the eye, and a firm and emphatic tone of voice told me, "You are very lucky you didn't listen to Rav Quinn. ..."

One of the fondest memories I have of Rav Belsky was one Shavuos night in Torah Vodaath. At about 3:00 a.m., I approached Rav Belsky

The Battle for *Bris Milah*

One of the many battles that Rav Belsky fought with great courage and bravery was to protect the sacred *mesorah* of *bris milah*. Publicly and privately, he sought to demolish the myth that somehow *metzitzah b'peh* was something optional, practiced primarily by Chassidim.

Himself a popular and greatly respected *mohel*, he repeatedly stressed that, when practiced properly, not only was MBP perfectly safe, but failure to perform MBP was a *sakanah* to the child. As always, to Rav Belsky, the words of *Chazal* were the absolute truth, and along with many other *Gedolim* and *Rabbanim*, he saw attempts to pressure the community into changing the way we perform this most fundamental *mitzvah* to be a great danger.

To learn more about Rav Belsky's behind-the-scenes activities for *bris milah*, I reached out to State Senator Simcha Felder, a fellow Torah Vodaath *talmid* who was actively

involved in the battle to protect *bris milah*, and whom I am privileged to call a close friend.

Senator Felder, a selfless *askan* for the benefit of the *klal*, first related to me another anecdote.

"As a *talmid* at Torah Vodaath, I always took pleasure in asking Harav Belsky *she'eilos*. There was a time when he stopped me immediately after I began to speak. 'Don't talk,' he said. 'You have laryngitis.' I smiled and continued with my question, but the Rav stopped me again. 'I'm serious,' he said. 'Don't talk, or whisper either. Sleep near a hot water humidifier for a few days and you'll feel better, *iy"H*.'

"I made an appointment with the well-known EMT Dr. Allen Goldstein, *z"l*," Senator Felder continued, "who diagnosed my condition precisely the same way Harav Belsky did, and who instructed me to follow the same advice.

"After I was elected to serve on the NYC Council, Harav Belsky was frequently the one

I went to for complicated communal *she'eilos*. The *Rosh Yeshivah* was able to understand the issues' technicalities, their impact on the *klal* and to give a very clear and definitive *psak*.

"*Metzitzah b'peh* was a great challenge for our community. We were battling a *milchemes mitzvah* and certainly couldn't concede our longstanding *minhag Yisrael*, so I did everything within my power to stop the City from interfering with our religious observance.

"Once again, Harav Belsky was called upon to engage in complex and sensitive discussions with NYC Health Department officials. Harav Belsky deftly went back and forth with New York's health experts on complicated medical issues without any hesitation. While they disagreed vehemently on how to proceed, the officials and health experts never once questioned the Rav's understanding of the matter.

"I recall feeling very proud witnessing such a *kiddush Hashem*," Senator Felder concluded.

and asked him a number of questions. In hindsight, I realize that it was likely that the *Rosh Yeshivah* would have preferred to be allowed to learn in peace on this Yom Tov of *Mattan Torah*, after answering numerous *she'eilos* from other *talmidim*. But not only did he graciously answer each of my questions, oblivious to the hour, he took the time to explain the detailed *metzius* of each *she'eilah* I presented, the relevant *Gemara*, how the *Shulchan Aruch paskens*, and precisely how they apply to the specific circumstances.

These were *she'eilos* that he had likely already answered hundreds of times, but to Rav Belsky, answering a *she'eilah* was a teaching opportunity. It was only when a glance at the clock saw that dawn was about to arrive did he stop, saying that it was time to go to the *mikveh*.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* lived and breathed the words of *Tanach* and *Chazal*.

Sixteen years ago, I visited *kivrei avos* in Ukraine for the first time. Horrified by the devastation I saw, I asked Rav Belsky whether I should undertake to raise funds to try to save a specific *beis hachaim*, where some of my maternal ancestors were buried, and which was now was being used as a cow pasture.

Rav Belsky responded by telling me a *passuk* in the first *perek* of *sefer Nechemiah*, which recounts how Nechemiah — who then held a prominent position in the court of the Persian King — learned of the bitter fate of the Jews who had returned to Eretz Yisrael with Ezra. Nechemiah describes to us how he reacted when hearing of the bitter plight of the Yidden then living in Eretz Yisrael, and how they are in



Kiddush Levanah outside the Masgidim beis medrash in Camp Agudah with the Nadvorna Rebbe, *shlita*, Harav Shlomo Leifer.

"great misery and humiliation."

Nechemiah later appeared before the Persian King Artachshasta (Artaxerxes), whom *Chazal* have identified as Daryavesh (Darius), the son of Esther and Achashverosh. The king asked Nechemiah, "Why is your face downcast? Since you are not ill, this can only signify that there is evil in your heart!"

Nechemiah relates that he became very frightened. He told the king, "May the King live forever. How can I not be downcast when the city of my ancestors' graves is in ruins, and its gates are consumed by fire?"

Rav Belsky pointed out that Nechemiah referred to Yerushalay-

im as *ha'ir beis kivros avosai* — "the city of my ancestors' graves." From this, he said, we learn that there is an obligation to do what we can to save *kivrei avos*.

The last time I merited to have a lengthy conversation with Rav Belsky was several weeks before Jonathan Pollard was scheduled to have his parole hearing. Rav Belsky expressed his profound pain at the grave injustice that was done to Pollard, and stressed the fact by passing classified information that America had about Arab countries to Israel, Pollard saved many lives. (Pollard has repeatedly expressed regret for his action, and for not finding a legal way to help Israel. Rav Belsky was

referring to his motivation.)

Rav Belsky had never met Jonathan Pollard, yet his great heart was filled with genuine anguish and worry over his plight.

It seems almost inconceivable that this Torah giant is no longer with us on this temporal world, that we will no longer be able to ask him a halachic *she'eilah*, to seek his guidance, and bask in his presence. Our only comfort is that his Torah — both in his *sefarim* that were published and the many *shiurim* that were recorded — will continue to light up our lives until Moshiach comes, and that he will certainly continue to *daven* for us in *Olam Haba*.

The *Rebbi* Who Changed My Life

RABBI MENACHEM MARK

When I entered twelfth grade, 46 years ago, my ambition was to become a lawyer. I also aspired to enter politics and make a difference in the world — I wasn't sure what difference, just some difference.

During my year in Rav Belsky's *shiur* I was amazed by my *rebbe*. Besides his greatness in all of Torah, his vast knowledge of history, languages, mathematics and the sciences was startling. How did he know it all? It was clear that he could have been a great professor, scientist or doctor, had he chosen to. Instead he dedicated his life to teaching Torah — and putting up with guys like me.

About halfway through the year, our *rebbe* began speaking to us about dedicating our years to learning Torah. He argued that one could have *parnasah* without going to college. His life and his words were one.

On graduation day, after the program in the yeshivah's auditorium ended, I received a message that Rav Belsky was waiting for me in our classroom, Room 206.

When I entered and sat down alone in front of his desk, he asked me about my plans for the near

future. He complimented me on the class yearbook I had edited, and told me that if I would dedicate myself to learning I could probably write a *sefer*.

A short while later I began summer classes in a local city university. One professor, a Jewish fellow with an Afro hairstyle, was being laid off from his position and asked us to write letters to the dean on his behalf.

One day during lunch break I noticed one of my college classmates, who sat across the aisle from me, walking with a friend on campus. This other fellow, because of the heat of the summer, wasn't wearing a shirt or anything else from the waist up. It began to become plain to me that with such teachers and such classmates, I wouldn't become any wiser. Rav Belsky's message was growing clearer.

I spent the second half of the summer in Camp Ohr Shraga. I was particularly moved by the presence of Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*, who visited for a week or so. His smile and humility made a deep impression on me. The contrast of the setting and atmosphere of the camp to that of the college campus hit home. Rav Belsky's message was now extremely clear in my mind. I decided to drop col-

lege and stick with learning Torah.

After I returned home and discussed my feelings with my parents, my father and I went to speak to the *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Gedalia Schorr, *zt"l*. He advised me to find a fresh setting and suggested I go to BMG in Lakewood. He said he would help me get in. Rav Belsky's message was now real.

Baruch Hashem, I followed his advice and have the *zechus* of being *marbitz Torah* and writing *sefarim*.

I kept up with *Rebbi* over the years, albeit not enough — most recently when I received the invitation to his son's *chasunah*, which was hand addressed, I believe in his handwriting. I came to say *mazel tov* and found him sitting at his table, next to the head table. I went over to him and because I figured he had greeted so many people, I introduced myself: "It's Menachem Mark. *Mazel tov, Rebbi*." He took my hand, pulled me closer and said: "You think I don't remember you?" Those were his last words to me.

After the *levayah* in yeshivah I wanted to go up once again to Room 206. I tried the door to the stairwell. It was locked. An era had closed — but the message lives on.

Rav Belsky at TheZone a few summers ago.



Answering the Questions “We-Don’t-Ask”

AVI KOLKO

It was my first night *seder* in Camp Agudah’s old *Masmidim beis medrash*. The other high school-age boys and I had started learning when a towering Rabbi Belsky, the great, the brilliant, the famous *Gadol*, Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, came over to speak with the boy sitting next to me. Rabbi Belsky stood and the boy sat until I heard what sounded like Rabbi Belsky admonishing the youngster to stand when he talks to a Rav. The boy stood up. Afterward, I asked the boy if that’s what had happened. Turns out, Rabbi Belsky had said no such thing; it was just hard to hear in the din of the loud *beis medrash*, so the boy stood up.

That was the Rabbi Belsky that I didn’t yet know. Within a short time, I came to know the real Rabbi Belsky. The Rabbi Belsky who would never have been *makpid* on his *kavod*. The Rabbi Belsky who had no problem treating teenagers as adults. The Rabbi Belsky whom my fellow *Masmidim* and I came to admire and adore.

Every now and then you hear about a *Shas* Yid. Rabbi Belsky was a *kol-haTorah-kulo* Yid. There was nothing that eluded his grasp. *Gemara*, *Halachah*, *mussar*, *Midrash*, *Nach*, *dikduk* ... he knew it all. He mastered disciplines from astronomy to quantum physics to life in the Middle Ages. His genius and *gadlus baTorah* were legendary around the world.

And as great as was his genius, so was his simplicity.

Being in the *Masmidim* program was an amazing experience. Where else could a tenth-grader hear *shiurim* from a *Gadol b’Yisrael*? Where else could a young *bachur* learn from a *kol-haTorah-kulo* Yid? But it wasn’t just the *shiurim* that made the program so amazing, it was him. Coming from yeshivos as varied as Ner Israel, Torah Temimah and Yeshiva Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, we all coalesced into one *chevrah*, coming together to be around Rabbi Belsky. We were his beloved *Masmidim*; he was our beloved *rebbe*.

I would be lying if I said I remember the *Gemara shiurim* he gave. But I do remember his *hashkafah shiurim*. They were twice-weekly Q&A sessions, and everything was on the table. There was nothing too obvious, too sensitive or too taboo to be asked ... and answered. He explained all the things *frum* people are expected to know but often don’t understand. He answered all the “we-don’t-ask-those-kind-of-questions” questions. And for us idealistic black-and-white-thinking teenagers, he gave us balance in *hashkafah* and in life.

He taught us so much about the world and *Yiddishkeit*. What to do



when faced with *nisyonos*? What exactly are the pitfalls in going to college? Is there really anything so bad with going to a ball game? Why are Chassidim not *makpid* on *zman tefillah*? How can there be *machlokes* between *Gedolim*? And so many others. It’s been 20 years since then, yet I often find myself thinking back to the *hashkafah* he taught us.

One time, I presented to him a litany of complaints about the yeshivah system. He kept repeating, “You’re right, you’re right ... But *l’maaseh*, the system produces beautiful *peiros*.”

This was a very potent message for a young boy; a system can have problems and still be a good system.

But these formal *hashkafah shiurim* were just part of it. We gained more from just being around Rabbi Belsky. After a *taanis*, we would go on hour-long walks on the dark Catskill roads, speaking, shmoozing, questioning, learning. He never gave us the feeling that he was better than us.

His little office was always a magical place. His never-ending half-cups of coffee. His *techum Shabbos* overlay on the aerial map of Camp Agudah. His book of herbs and trees.

He was available to us many hours a day, and you would usually find someone inside speaking in learning or discussing a personal issue.

Rabbi Belsky wanted to build the camp’s *sefarim* library to be the largest in the Catskills. He told us that the price of a *sefer* is irrelevant; if you don’t need the *sefer* it doesn’t matter if it’s cheap, and if you do need the *sefer* it’s worth paying for it. However, he was particular that binding tape should not cover the spine of a *sefer*, as he wanted each one to retain its unique look and personality. That taught me that even from the perspective of “Torah, Torah, Torah,” there is value to being sensitive to externals.

One morning, before he started the *shiur*, he gave a mini-*hesped* on the Debrecener Rav, *zt”l*, who had passed away. He said that, although the Debrecener Rav was older than him, he considered him a friend. It

struck me as odd that Rabbi Belsky had “friends.” A while later I asked him a *Halachah* question and he told me that he discussed it with some friends and they don’t think it’s a problem. I took the opportunity to ask him, “*Rebbi* has friends?” And he said, “Yes, I have friends.”

He was a regular person. In fact, some afternoons, he would play paddleball with the *Masmidim*. (He was hard to beat!) With all his brilliance, he was still “normal.”

One night each summer, we would drive to the dam of the Neversink Reservoir, turn off the headlights and take time to condition our eyes to the darkness. Then, with the unobstructed 360-degree view of the horizon, Rabbi Belsky would treat us to a virtual tour of the night sky, replete with *maamarei Chazal* relating to each constellation. Each summer since then, I go back to the Neversink and try to relive some of those wonderful times.

We once took a trip to the Empire Kosher plant in Mifflintown, Pennsylvania. Rabbi Belsky was our guide, and he was as comfortable with the machinery and procedures as he was in his office. He casually explained to us that he had in fact set up much of the operation. As we were walking around, he went over to the production line, picked up some chickens and, on the spot, *paskened* if they were *treifos* or not.

Every Shabbos *seudah*, he would join the *Masmidim* for *zemiros*. He transported us back 50 or 100 years, to a time when Jewish music was more Jewish, and taught us many beautiful *niggunim* of that era. He loved singing and he himself composed a beautiful tune for the *zemer Shimru Shabsosai*, which I sing at my Shabbos table to this day.

As great a genius as he was, he maintained tremendous *bitul* toward his *rebbeim*. When discussing *Halachah* questions with us, if he would quote Rav Moshe’s opinion, it was with reverence, as if to say that was the final word on the topic. In

shiur, he often said *pshatim* from his *rebbeim* Harav Reuven Grozovsky and Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zech-er tzaddikim livrachah*. And he spoke to us with a loving awe about his relationship and what he gained from the previous Rav of Camp Agudah, Harav Yaakov Teitelbaum, *zt”l*.

At the end of one summer, I came to say goodbye, and told him I would be visiting Eretz Yisrael. He started walking with me, pacing back and forth on the grass outside, asking me caringly about my plans for the trip. Among other things, he told me about which *Gedolim* I should say the *brachah* of *Shechalak meichochmaso liyerei’av*.

Everything he said was always *b’nachas* — *divrei chachamim b’nachas nishma’im*. He knew, however, that being a politically correct diplomat is not part of a *Gadol’s* job description, and would tell us things he felt we needed to know.

One summer, we went on an outing to a mountain. It was supposed to be a five-hour walk up the mountain, but due to some difficulties it wound up taking seven hours. That didn’t deter Rabbi Belsky from giving a short *shiur* on the *Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah* when we got to the mountaintop.

The trek down the mountain was treacherous. We were drenched by a downpour and were walking in pitch darkness, save for a few flashlights. Every 30 minutes, we stopped to take a roll call, rest and sing a little. We lit candles to conserve the flashlight batteries for when we were walking. On top of all this, we weren’t even sure we were going in the right direction and we had no way to communicate with the world.

I don’t know what Rabbi Belsky, who was responsible for us, was thinking, but he appeared to be eminently calm and at peace. We wound up reaching our bus at 3 a.m. I still remember Rabbi Belsky *davening Maariv* with a towel on his head, over his *yarmulke*; he didn’t want to *daven* without a “hat.”

Ten years later, I went to Rabbi Belsky to discuss something. He started waxing nostalgic about that trip, about the candles, about the songs that we sang as we rested. He wasn’t too big to reminisce with a former *talmid* many decades his junior about a memorable experience.

This was the Rabbi Belsky I got to know. A great *Gaon*, certainly. But not one who would ever demand that a young *bachur* stand up for him. He was bigger than that. His sensitivity, his goodness, his level-headedness, his normalcy, his caring ... that’s the Rabbi Belsky that I and so many *talmidim*, young and old, knew and loved.

Yehi zichro boruch.

My Memories of a Legendary Rebbi

A TALMID

Tzaddikim b'misasan kruyim chaim: For the *talmidim* of Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, he will never be gone. The many lessons he taught us, his brilliance and dedication to Torah, the memories of time shared, of his warmth, caring and attention to the individual, will remain with us forever.

...

I was a *talmid* of Rav Belsky's for several summers in Camp Agudah's Masmidim Program — a learning program for 15- to 17-year-old *bachurim* — and not a day went by during that time in which each of us was not astounded anew at our *rebbe*.

He was a very rare genius, brilliant in all aspects of Torah and, *l'havdil*, in general subjects as well. The breadth of his knowledge knew no bounds, and we Masmidim at Camp Agudah had the great pleasure of drinking from its ever-flowing fountain.

There are several legendary stories about Rav Belsky that every one of his *talmidim* has heard somewhere: One is that, as a teenager, Rav Belsky took the SAT exam twice, once scoring a 1590 and the second time achieving a perfect 1600. He was then awarded a full college scholarship by the State of New York, yet — in an anecdote confirmed by his son, Rabbi Tzvi Belsky, in being *maspid* his father — he requested a deferral while he spent a year learning only Torah.

Though the scholarship generally could not be deferred, Rav Belsky wrote letters to the scholarship board, and they eventually granted him a special exemption — first for one year, then for a second. Ultimately, he never attended college, but dedicated his life to Torah; nevertheless, after his trailblazing case, the scholarship board created a new exemption, allowing for the deferral of a scholarship for those who wished to spend time devoting themselves to Talmudic study.

Another legendary story has Rav Belsky contacting NASA after he noticed a star in the sky that didn't seem to belong there. The NASA officials, stunned at receiving Rabbi Belsky's call, consulted their books, told him that this rare star became visible just once in 70 years — and proceeded to name that star after him.

Genius in and of itself is a blessing from Hashem, but it brings with it a great responsibility — to take advantage of it, to use it to be *marbeh kvod Shamayim*, and to help others in need. And indeed, almost every waking moment of Rav Belsky's life was lived in the service of *Hakadosh*



Harav Belsky dancing with Masmidim at a *melaveh malkah* during summer 2003.

Baruch Hu and His People.

...

When I was 15, but had not yet joined the Masmidim program, my father, who was close with Rav Belsky from years spent in camp, asked him to learn with me privately. Thus, for several summers, I had the great merit to learn with Rav Belsky nearly every day, in his office just off the camp's *beis medrash*.

When I did join the Masmidim program, and was now hearing *shiur* from Rav Belsky every day (and knew how busy his schedule was), I assumed that would be the end of our private *seider*; yet after the first few days of the summer, when I hadn't come knocking at the usual time, it was *he* who sought me out and insisted that we maintain our *seider*.

Our learning session took place during Rav Belsky's only "free" time of the day: his official calling hours, when anyone could call his number to ask him *she'eilos*.

During my time learning with Rav Belsky, I was amazed to observe how, despite his very busy schedule, he was so generous with the time he gave to others, including me.

Of course, there was in fact no such thing as "free time" for Rav Belsky. As anyone who has spent a few minutes in Rav Belsky's office can attest, private sessions with him included almost as many interruptions as actual discussions, as there was always an endless stream of phone calls and visitors, from both *talmidim* and strangers, asking him for help and seeking his advice on various matters.

The breadth of the *she'eilos* asked

of him was absolutely incredible: *Hilchos Shabbos*, *kashrus*, *brachos*, *Bein Hametzarim*, *dikduk*, *taytch*, matters of health, *hashkafah*, personal issues and much more. I once heard a *talmid* exiting Rav Belsky's office exclaim to his friends, "There is *nothing* that *Rebbi* doesn't know!"

Though stories about his vast knowledge in all areas were a part of Rav Belsky's legend, neither I nor any of his *talmidim* I know ever saw him studying a secular subject; indeed, at his *levayah*, Rabbi Tzvi Belsky said that despite his father's immense knowledge of virtually every subject imaginable, he never saw him studying anything other than Torah. *Hafach bah v'hafach bah, d'kulah bah*.

Our *rebbe* never stopped learning. He was an extraordinary *gaon* and *masmid*; every moment that was not spent helping others, giving counsel or answering *she'eilos*, was devoted to *limud haTorah*. Rabbi Duvie Frischman, who assisted Rav Belsky with the Masmidim program for nearly 20 years, told me that on one 36-hour trip with the Masmidim to Niagara Falls, *Rebbi* had learned through the entire first *perek* of *Kiddushin* — the largest *perek* in *Shas*, containing 40 *blatt*. This sort of *hasmadah*, *ameilus* and *geonus* is difficult for the rest of us to comprehend.

...

On Tishah B'Av, *Rebbi* would undertake a particularly grueling speaking schedule. After *Maariv* on Tishah B'Av night, Rav Belsky would give a *shiur* for an hour on a *perek* of *Megillas Eichah*. (I'll never forget the time tears streamed down his cheeks as he described the incomprehen-

sibly tragic passage "*Yedei nashim rachmaniyyos bishlu yaldeihen ...*")

The next morning, people would come from across the Catskills to the Camp Agudah shul for *Kinos*. Rav Belsky would explain and discuss each *kinah* before its recital, giving a special meaning to each heartbreaking passage, which lasted until just a few minutes before *Minchah*.

Then, *Rebbi* would make an appeal for Chinuch Atzmai before *Minchah*; after *Minchah*, he gave a *shiur* on half of *Sefer Iyov* — perhaps stopping once in the middle to close his eyes and rest on the table for about ten minutes — that lasted until *Maariv*. Following *Maariv* and the breaking of the fast, Rav Belsky, even as an elderly man, would go on a walk with the Masmidim.

I recently heard from Rabbi Frischman that Rabbi Belsky always fasted on his mother's *yahrtzeit*, 11 Av. Even in a year when Tishah B'Av was *nidcheh* — meaning the Tishah B'Av fast was observed on 10 Av — *Rebbi* would fast on 11 Av as well.

...

Despite Rav Belsky's unimaginably busy schedule and numerous responsibilities — as *Rosh Yeshivah* of Torah Vodaath, Rav of Camp Agudah, *kashrus* advisor at the OU, *manhig*, *Posek*, and one of the *Gedolei Hador* — he always had time for his *talmidim*, and his scheduled Masmidim events were sacred: During all my years in Camp Agudah, I never saw Rav Belsky miss a single *shiur* or any other scheduled program with his beloved Masmidim.

During the summer, for the Masmidim, Rav Belsky delivered an

hour-long *Gemara shiur* every morning during first *seider*. Twice a week, he gave an hour-long *shiur* during second *seider*; the topic of the first half of the *shiur* varied based on the year, and the second half was an open *she'eilos u'teshuvos* session. Every night after *Maariv*, he gave a *Daf Yomi shiur* for anyone who wanted to attend.

And our *rebbe* was there for all of our extracurricular activities. On Thursday nights, he would go with the Masmidim on a walk down the country roads, or we would all build and sit around a campfire across the camp lake. He had such an *anivus*, a delight in being around his *talmidim*, and love for camp life, that he would participate in all our events. How often does a teenager have the opportunity to sit around a campfire, as one of the *Gedolei Hador* sits next to him, enjoying marshmallows?

In the afternoons, after a full day of learning and answering *she'eilos*, Rav Belsky would play paddleball with his *talmidim* or anyone else in camp who was playing on the courts, and later go swimming in the camp pool.

As Harav Elya Brudny mentioned during his *hesped* at Rav Belsky's *levayah*, boys in camp would come to him for help with things like how to use a *maamar Chazal* in a camp play: "Nothing was beneath him." Indeed, we all felt that our *rebbe* enjoyed the camp activities as much, or perhaps even more, than anyone else.

After he ate *seudos Shabbos* with his family, he would join us in the Masmidim dining room. On Friday nights, there would be an *oneg Shabbos* after the *seudah*, and on Motzoei Shabbos there was always a *melaveh malkah*.

During these special times, Rav Belsky — who felt a deep nostalgia for his decades spent in camp — would regale us with tales of old Camp Agudah.

As we sat around a campfire on a Thursday night, or around the tables in the dining room at a *melaveh malkah*, listening to *Rebbi's* stories of his early days as a camper and counselor, and then as Rav, of overnight trips and campfires and experiences with the previous camp Rav, Harav Yaakov Teitelbaum, *zt"l* — some of which took place in the very same room, or same forest — we could visualize those days, gain an appreciation for those who came before us, of the connection we shared with so many generations of "Camp Agudah boys" and feel lucky that we had a *rebbe* with as much love for camp as we had.

Rav Belsky would also come on our trips with us, and once or twice a summer he would take us on a special stargazing trip. On a clear night, by the Neversink reservoir, with no lights in sight and standing under



Harav Belsky with Masmidim at a *seudas preidah* at the end of summer 2002.

a dark, cloudless sky, Rabbi Belsky would point out the constellations, as we marveled at the *niflaos haBorei* and at our *rebbe's* knowledge thereof.

Some of the greatest memories of the Masmidim Program are of the "*niggunei harav*," the special, old songs that Rav Belsky loved to teach his *talmidim*. Learning and singing the *niggunei harav* were among the great joys of the summer for us Masmidim. A *seudah*, *oneg Shabbos*, *melaveh malkah*, campfire, trip — any occasion was a great opportunity to sing the *niggunei harav*.

During the first week or two of camp, the new boys would generally stumble through the songs; our *Rebbi* would smile and wince at the same time, and with a wave of his hand, he would stop us and put us back on the right key. Several weeks into the summer, we'd know the songs, and then we knew we felt like full-fledged Masmidim! "The Kasha and Teretz Niggun," "The Train Song," "Rebbi's Father's Niggun," "Odeh LaKel," the "entrance" and "exit" songs, "Avraham Nyu," "Ha," and of course, "Al Zois," are among the classics we will be singing forever.

...

Though Rav Belsky taught thousands of *talmidim* through the years, and numerous others sought his counsel on an endless number of issues, Rav Belsky treated each of us as a *yachid*, remembered us, and cared for us.

Knowing how busy he was, I tried not to call him unless absolutely necessary for a major *she'eilah*. Once, when I had just such a *she'eilah*, I called and discussed the issue with him. Several years later, I had a similar *she'eilah*, but since the circumstances were somewhat different, I decided to ask him again, just in case the answer might be different. As soon as I called to ask the *she'eilah*, the first thing he said was, "I think we spoke about this once..."! I was astounded at how this *Gadol* — who must have dealt with tens of

thousands of people and answered hundreds of thousands of questions in the several years that had passed between the two instances — remembered that I had asked the same question years earlier!

This incident is just one of probably hundreds of thousands that demonstrate not only *Rebbi's* brilliance, but his individual attention to each *talmid*.

Once, when I returned home after attending a *simchah* of a relative, a family member told me that shortly after I had left the *simchah*, Rav Belsky, who was close with my family, had come. Not long after, I received a phone call: It was Rav Belsky, calling me to say that he had been looking forward to seeing me at the *simchah* and was disappointed that he had missed me. Rav Chaim Yisroel Belsky — one of the *Gedolei Hador*, among the foremost *Poskim* of his generation, father of a very large family, *ka"m*, and counselor to untold numbers of troubled souls — had taken the time to call a young kid, to tell him that he had been looking forward to seeing him at a *simchah* and was sorry he had missed him.

Indeed, *Rebbi* valued each of his *talmidim*, and treated each as a cherished individual. One of his students in twelfth grade during the late 1960s told me how each year, Rav Belsky would take several boys who he knew were considering attending college and would convince them to stay in yeshivah and not go to college; he was thereby able to turn countless boys into lifetime *bnei Torah*. Yet when I was planning on attending graduate school, I asked Rav Belsky, and he gave me his blessing without the slightest reservation — for he knew that would be best for me. Similarly, I once read in a *sefer* someone had written of *she'eilos u'teshuvos* that one may not read certain material on Shabbos; nevertheless, when I — who was not sitting and learning all day — informed him that my Shabbosos were miserable when I was not able to enjoy it with that type of reading

material, he said it was okay for me to read, as long as I did not overdo it.

Chanoch lanaar al pi darko: Our *Rebbi* knew just the proper *derech* for each *talmid*. He loved each of his *talmidim*, and we loved him.

...

When it was time to stand up for the Torah, Rav Belsky did not hesitate to do so, even when it involved controversy that caused him much personal heartache. Nobody will forget the war he waged against *eruv* in Brooklyn, in his firm belief that, per the wishes of all the *Gedolim* of the previous generation, it was forbidden to carry on Shabbos in areas surrounded by such *eruv*. Our *Rebbi* was as firm and unyielding as one could possibly be in protecting *Halachah*, yet there was no greater *ohav shalom v'rodef shalom*.

Numerous people who came to him with *she'eilos* or *dinei Torah* will recall how he would encourage a *p'sharah*, a compromise, in order to maintain peace.

I recall one incident in which I came to him with a *she'eilah*: A boy in camp whom we will call Yitzchak — a long-time friend of mine — had ordered a product for several of his friends, including me, yet he ordered a somewhat different product than what we had wanted. I was furious at Yitzchak and did not want to pay him for a product I did not want; Yitzchak, in turn, was furious at me. I decided to ask Rav Belsky if I had to pay, and though, as I recall, he did not say I was obligated to pay, he encouraged me to keep the product and pay Yitzchak.

I followed *Rebbi's* instructions; soon thereafter, Yitzchak and I apologized to each other, and continued our friendship as always. If I had refused to pay him — as was perhaps my right to do so — rather than heeding *Rebbi's* advice, it would have meant the end of a long-time friendship.

...

Our *rebbe's* knowledge and wisdom inspired us all. I once overheard a fellow *talmid* speaking to his parents, and in describing his experiences as a Masmid, he said, "Every time I think I realize how much Rabbi Belsky knows, I then learn something new, and am continually re-amazed at how much more he knows than I had thought!"

Like his legendary, eponymous star, Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, was a rarity — a brilliant *talmid chacham* and *tzaddik*; a leading *Posek*; a perceptive and loving *Rebbi*; as strong as one had to be, yet as soft as one can possibly be; honored by multitudes yet a giant in *anivus* — a *chad b'doro*, whom we can never comprehend fully, yet whose brilliant light illuminates us all.

Undying *Aveilus* for an Ultimate *Av*, an Unbelievable *Avreich*, an Indomitable *Even Ha'ezer*

Remembrances of our dear Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, zt"l

HILLEL L. YARMOVE

Rebbi, you knew — didn't you?—that I'd just have to write about your fabulously rich *ruchniyus*-filled life when that soul-searing time of departure would come — as it surely did this past week?

Forget the fact that just days earlier, I poured out my heart to the *Eibershter* in the old Achvah shul on Rechov Reishis Chochmah in the Zichron Moshe neighborhood of Yerushalayim as part of an 11:30 Sunday-night emergency *kinus* organized by your students (and my protégés) from our Masmidim program — a group of boys closest to your heart year after year at the flagship Camp Agudah in upstate New York — I and 50 wonderful *bachurim*. Believe me, we tried storming Heaven on your behalf, but now we realize that it was the *Basheffer's* will that your time on this earth should draw to a close — and, of course, we accept Hashem's loving edict.

Ah, the old Achvah shul! Why, the very seat of its spiritual leader, Harav Tzvi Pesach Frank, zt"l, still remains empty of its special treasure, the great Rav who left his implant on *Klal Yisrael* 100 or so years ago — all the while reminding us of what the absence of a world-class *Gadol* means to his surroundings. The place itself is marked by a plaque commemorating his service to *Klal Yisrael*. But Harav Frank's dedication to the Torah even now reverberates in the soul of each and every Jew.

And so it was with you, my dearest teacher, friend, confidant — and exemplum par excellence of what stature a man can reach if only he devotes himself to practicing the precepts of the Torah as though they were part of his lifeblood, for that is indeed what the Torah was to you — indistinguishable from the man who embodied these precepts.

You were an *av* — a father — to your *talmidim*, and they requited the love you showered upon them with a gushing forth of uncontrollable admiration and respect. How much you cared about everyone in Camp Agudah — from the special kids to the waiters, from the Russian-Jewish and Sephardic *bachurim* to those who came from unaffiliated homes — all this became a legend in our camp. Every boy felt that Rav Belsky was there just for him.

And I? Well, I felt that you were the older brother that I was never granted. How we related to each other was exactly on that level: you, my older



On a trip with Masmidim from Camp Agudah.



At a camp *melaveh malkah*.



Learning by the lake with Camp Agudah Masmidim.

brother, engaging in scintillating repartee with your younger sibling. And how I treasured those moments that I was *zocheh* to spend together with you!

And more, oh so much more! You were my halachic *avreich*, my spiritual guide and advisor. Consequently, my children also became your advisees, one actually becoming a star *talmid* of yours at your beloved Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. As he wouldn't undertake any meaningful activity without first consulting you, so I too learned that my first step to any meaningful course of action was to consult my *avreich*, my advisor, Rav Belsky.

But how could you have become a father and advisor to today's "modern, with-it" generation? After all, you were a throwback to a gentler, easier time, a "magnificent anachronism" of the kind never seen any more in our generation. You see, you enjoyed life to the hilt — and it was that very zest for *joyously living the right way* and achieving the proper stature that you passed along to all of us.

And despite the very many difficulties which you encountered along the way, you never ceased smiling and treating others with a light-hearted respect that won their hearts from the very outset. In this area you became our stone of assistance — our *even ha'ezer* — in that you were there for us to learn that life is indeed enjoyable, all the while not giving in for a moment to any *shemetz of ennui* or laziness.

You were a mountaineer (even in those days, I could never keep up with you on our hikes!), a violinist, a harmonica-player (harmonicist?) who delighted us with various *niggunim* on the way to Niagara Falls (one of



your all-time favorite destinations) or other such locale, a super-proficient handball player, a scientist and astronomer, a lyricist, a vocalist, a state-of-the-art *baal korei*, and *chazzan*: actually, the list never seems to end. And you did it all with a *joie de vivre* that became a beacon of light and hope for us all.

Little wonder it is, then, that as I edit just some of the YARMOFOTO pictures that I took of you at work and play over the past 28 years at Camp Agudah, I feel that I can no longer go on. The loss is too great; the searing pain is just too severe. And my tears keep flooding my computer's keyboard. I feel that I just can't hack it.

Wait a second! Is this the *aveilus* that *Rebbi* would have sanctioned?

I don't think so.

Rebbi, you would have wanted us to continue experiencing Shabbos as a super-holiday, a true Yom Tov, replete with the magic of the *zemiros* that you had taught us. You would have wanted us to continue on the path of true *aha-vas Yisrael*, melded with that special brand of *derech eretz* for which you were justly famous. You would have expected us to push ourselves just a bit more in our learning — all for the sake of Heaven, always for the sake of Heaven.

Rebbi, you would have *cheerfully* informed us that our world was darkened by your *petirah* only temporarily — but that soon in our days we would experience the true joy of *bi'as haMoshiach*, which we could bring

through a rejuvenating re-dedication to the Torah and to the *Yiddishkeit* that you were always putting into practice — 24/7.

Don't worry, *Rebbi*, we, your dear *talmidim*, friends and admirers, will never let our *av*, *avreich* and *even* down — as we didn't when you lived in this world nor now that you inhabit *Olam Haba*.

As you were there for us, we shall always now be there for you, Harav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l* — my dearest friend, Rav, confidant and advisor! *Tehei nishmaso tzerurah bitzror hachaim!*

Rabbi Yarmove is Director of Special Activities and Masmidim Staff Member, Camp Agudah (Ferndale, New York)



Partial view of the crowd at the *levayah* outside Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

Excerpts From the *Hespeidim* at Yeshiva Torah Vodaath

HAMODIA STAFF

Harav Yosef Savitsky, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Torah Vodaath, noted that Harav Belsky was outstanding in so many areas, including the depth and breadth of his learning and the comprehensive and profound way he performed *chessed*.

Harav Savitsky expressed *hakaras hatov* on behalf of the entire yeshivah for all that Harav Belsky did on its behalf. And he asked of the *bnei hayeshivah* to show their *hakaras hatov* by being *mis'chazek* in their own learning and *tefillos*.

Harav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *shlita*, *chaver*, Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah and *Rosh Yeshivah*, Yeshivah Gedolah of Philadelphia, noted about Harav Belsky, "Whatever he learned from his *rebbeim* became a *chelek* of him. He lived with great *mesirus nefesh*, giving his whole life to *harbotzas haTorah*. Even during the summer, he dedicated his days to teaching Torah to *Yiddishe kind-*

er."

"What," asked Rav Kamenetsky, "can be greater than that?"

Harav Meir Weinberg, *shlita*, *R"m* in Torah Vodaath, highlighted the fact that Harav Belsky, unlike many of his Torah contemporaries, was "an American *bachur* ... who grew up in the U.S. with its *nisyonos*. Through effort, *hasmadah* and determination, he became an *adam gadol*."

"It's a tremendous *mechayev*," reflected Harav Weinberg. While Harav Belsky admittedly had greater *kishronos* than most people, basically he was a "*masmid atzum*."

Rav Weinberg marveled at how the *Rosh Yeshivah* was a *Gadol baTorah* in every *miktzoa*: as a *magid shiur* in the *beis medrash*, he said the *Tosafos*, *Nesivos*, and *Birkas Shmuel* on all the *yeshivishe masechtos*. He knew all of *Shas*, and was a *baal Halachah* in *arbaah chelkei Shulchan Aruch*, fluent in every part of it. Additionally, he was a *baki* in *Tanach* and other parts of Torah with which many are unfam-

iliar. He was also an expert *baal dikduk*. The *Rosh Yeshivah* was a "*maayan hamisgaber*" in every aspect of Torah.

...

"The *Rosh Yeshivah*," said Rav Weinberg, "was also a *baal chessed nifla*, with many of his abundant acts of kindness unknown to the *tzibbur*."

But in order to be a *Gadol b'Yisrael*, Harav Weinberg explained, "one also has to be an innovator, to have courage and leadership. Harav Belsky was a leader in the yeshivah, bringing it out of a difficult situation into a much better one."

Harav Elya Katz, *shlita*, *Menahel* of the Torah Vodaath *beis midrash*, emphasized Harav Belsky's role as the head and heart of the yeshivah. He was also the *lev* of *Klal Yisrael*. Whether it was a *tzibbur* or individual who needed *chizuk*, Harav Belsky was there for them. His *ahavas Yisrael* was wondrous.

During the *Rosh Yeshivah's* hospital stay, joining the family were

yungeleit who, while not biologically related to the Belskys, felt like the *Rosh Yeshivah's* children.

They were part of the Belsky home, which was "an open house for every broken heart."

Rav Katz quoted the Tzelach, who says that when one's path in life is to do the will of Hashem with great love and *cheshek*, becoming *nisdabek* to Hashem, such a person has *Olam Haba* in this world. The *Rosh Yeshivah* exemplified that way of life.

...

In the 1950s, when Harav Belsky was a young man, the mainstream path was to invest one's energies in secular education and a profession. But the *Rosh Yeshivah* understood that *Ki heim chayeinu*. He put his whole *kishron* into Torah ... and to work for *Klal Yisrael*, *tzedakah* and *chessed*. While the top learners in yeshivah were anxious to learn from him, he also made sure to draw close and give attention to the weaker *talmidim*.



Harav Yeruchim Olshin



Rabbi Avraham Belsky



Rabbi Meir Weinberg



Rabbi Elimelech Belsky

Harav Elya Brudny, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* at Mirrer Yeshiva, Brooklyn, lamented, “*Sar v’gadol nafal hayom b’Yisrael*,” calling the *Rosh Yeshivah* one of the *yeichidei hador*.

Harv Brudny recalled that when, as a *bachur*, he was a *talmid* in the *shiur* of Harav Zelig Epstein, *zt”l*, in Torah Vodaath, Harav Zelig needed to be out for one *Pesach zman* for health reasons. Harav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt”l*, brought Harav Belsky, a *yungerman* in his 20s, to the yeshivah from Bais Medrash Elyon’s *kollel* to take over the *shiur*. “It was such a *hatzlachadike zman*,” remembers Harav Brudny. “Was there ever in this country another 25-year-old who gave *shiurim* in a high-level *beis medrash*?”

...

“His love for Torah,” said Rav Brudny, “was an unquenchable thirst. He was a singular *Gaon olam*. And all this was camouflaged with so many different *levushim*: *kashrus* coordination. Rav in camp. Father of Russian Jewry in the neighborhood. *Amud hachessed*.”

Similarly, Harav Yeruchim Olshin, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah*, Bais Medrash Govoha, stated that Harav Belsky was crowned with the *keser* of all of Torah. Citing the Alter of Kelm, *zt”l*, he referred to a *melech* as one who is *osek b’tzorchei tzibbur kol hayom, nosei b’ol Klal Yisrael yomam valaylah*.

“He had a *groise moach*, a great mind,” said Harav Olshin, and an even “*gressere hartz* — a greater heart.”

Rabbi Menachem Genack, director of *kashrus* at the Orthodox Union, spoke of Harav Belsky’s brilliance, and how it emerged in his ability to discern whether a company owner was acting with integrity, or to calculate the volume of oil that a multi-level tanker could hold. And he dwelt on the *Rosh Yeshivah*’s “constant pursuit of justice, even to the most forlorn person in the world.”

Rabbi Genack cited a story that

Rav Yaakov Galinsky, *zt”l*, told about Harav Chaim Brisker, *zt”l*, when he was a child. Chaimke, as he was called, was running a high fever; the doctors thought he would not survive. Suddenly, the fever broke and the child swiftly recovered. Chaimke later told his family about his dream while in the throes of his fever.

First, the background: Chaimke learned in the local *cheder*, where his *rebbe* showed blatant favoritism toward the wealthier children. One day, some mischief created a ruckus in class and the *rebbe* slapped a poor orphan boy, blaming him for the disruption. In truth, that child was innocent. Chaimke was so upset by the *rebbe*’s actions that he did not return to the *cheder* again. “I will not learn in a class with a person who makes orphans suffer,” the child said. From then on, he learned with his father, the *Beis HaLevi*, *zt”l*.

Now, in his dream, just as the *malach hamaves* was about to take young Chaim from this world, that orphan boy’s father, in *Shamayim*, grabbed the angel’s hand and didn’t let him touch the boy. At that second, the fever broke; Chaim’s sensitivity to injustice and to the pain of another had saved his life.

Similarly, said Rabbi Genack, Harav Belsky stood up for people others had given up on. He swam against the current, even at great risk to himself, because he stood for truth and knew the importance of helping others.

Rabbi Mendel Belsky, brother of the *niftar*, traced the roots of his family’s *ahavas haTorah* to their parents and grandparents, who greatly encouraged growth within the walls of the *beis midrash*. Harav Berel Belsky, *z”l*, father of the *niftar*, studied in the yeshivah of the Chofetz Chaim, *zt”l*, in Radin.

Rabbi Aryeh Belsky, eldest son of the family, described the love and thirst for learning he witnessed in his father, who awoke at 5:30 every morning to learn with his *chavrusa* and filled his days and nights with

intense *limud*.

Once, while learning with a *talmid* in Camp Agudah, the *Rosh Yeshivah* ran to the *beis midrash* to get a *sefer*. His son asked him why he hadn’t sent the *talmid*, instead, to procure the *sefer*. Harav Belsky

He was involved in so many learning endeavors — for *baalei batim* ... for *bachurim* ... for *bein hazemanim* ... for bringing back *mitzvos* that had been almost forgotten.

answered, “That’s not the way. When you need a *sefer*, you have to run and get it yourself.”

Four years ago, after his miraculous recovery from a life-threatening illness, the staff at the rehabilitation center marveled at how intensely the *Rosh Yeshivah* drove himself in his therapy. “He is anxious to go back to giving his lectures,” one doctor explained to another.

His *shiurim* were priority to him. Whether it meant leaving a wedding, or an event honoring his son-in-law, if it was time to give the *shiur*, that came first.

...

People also came first. Harav Belsky was exquisitely sensitive to the needs of others, as only a *Gadol b’Yisrael* can be. When someone went through a hard time, said

Reb Aryeh, it pierced his father’s *neshamah*.

He drove a considerable distance several times a year to visit a *bachur* suffering from an illness, to be *mechazek* him.

Reb Aryeh described how his father showed extreme patience and deep compassion for difficult individuals who found their way into the Belsky home. Once Reb Aryeh awoke at night to find his father tenderly feeding a family of kittens whose mother had abandoned them.

...

Rabbi Yaakov Gross, a son-in-law of the *Rosh Yeshivah*, connected the multifaceted *gadlus* of his father-in-law with the seven *kolos*, voices, Hashem sends into the world, as mentioned in *Tehillim*. In reference to “*Kol Hashem al hamayim*,” he said the Torah of the *Rosh Yeshivah* was like “cold water on a worn-out *nefesh*.”

“To people who had questions without answers and no strength to move on, he gave answers, and *chizuk*, and refreshed their tired spirits. He taught them, ‘Just concentrate on *Dvar Hashem yakim l’olam*.’”

Rabbi Gross mentioned “*Kol Hashem bakoach*” in connection with the *milchamos* the *Rosh Yeshivah* had to wage, as far back as 40 years ago. He fought for the *psak* of the *Gedolei Torah*, for *emes*, for the *Dvar Hashem*.

He was involved in so many learning endeavors — for *baalei batim* ... for *bachurim* ... for *bein hazemanim* ... for bringing back *mitzvos* that had been almost forgotten. Regarding the complex laws of *nikur*, he tracked down one last person from Eretz Yisrael with the relevant *mesorah* from Ashkenaz.

And the same energy, said Rabbi Gross, that his father-in-law invested in *mitzvos bein adam laMakom*, he invested in *bein adam lachaveiro*, as well. He related that one *Pesach*, when a certain *bachur* was a guest for a *seudah* in the Belsky home,

Continued on page 38



Partial view of the crowd inside Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

Excerpts From the Hespeidim

Continued from page 37

the family ran out of mayonnaise. Knowing that the *bachur* enjoyed it, the *Rosh Yeshivah* sat down with one of his children to make homemade Pesach mayonnaise, patiently adding the oil drop by drop — so one *bachur* could have it for one *seudah*.

The *Rosh Yeshivah's* son Harav Eimelech Belsky spoke of the tremendous clarity with which his father viewed the world. He said the *Rosh Yeshivah* would sigh when small-mindedness made “people build themselves a molehill and become unable to see beyond it. Their money becomes so important ... they can’t *fargin* someone else.” In contrast, Torah lifts a person above “the *narishkeit* of the *velt*.”

Once, while explaining a *peirush* on why the Raavad uses a certain *lashon*, Harav Belsky said, “We have to get up and dance.” His *simchas haTorah* was palpable. “My father’s *ibergegebenheit* to Torah,” said Reb Elimelech, “was *gorem* everything. He wanted everyone to have it.”

Reb Avraham Belsky spoke movingly of the loving role model his father was to him, from earliest childhood. Shabbos morning, before

going to shul, the *Rosh Yeshivah* sat with his young children, *Gemara* in hand, as they ate breakfast. The *Gemara* was with him when he accompanied his children on excursions to Prospect Park, where they played on the grass while their father learned.

One Chol Hamoed, his siblings were occupied with trips and activities and Avraham had nothing to do. Harav Belsky took him, after *Maariv*, on an unforgettable trip. They learned together on the train, then disembarked at the World Trade Center, where the *Rosh Yeshivah* pointed out the stars and nearby buildings to his son. On the way home, he said, “Come, Avraham, now let’s learn together again.”

Reb Avraham also spoke of his father’s *avodah* of *tefillah*, his special *davening* at the *amud* during Yamim Nora’im; his *Tefillas Tal* and *Tefillas Geshem* on Pesach and Sukkos. And the beautiful, *hartzig zemiros* and *niggunim* he had learned from his Zeidy Wilhelm and from *talmidim* of Harav Baruch Ber Lebowitz, *zt”l*.

Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz, a son-in-law of the *Rosh Yeshivah*, said, “We lost the *gibbor hador*. He said what needed to be said; he said the truth. There were repercussions. Sometimes he was dragged

through the mud — but he spoke the truth. What people said about him didn’t matter; what the *Shulchan Aruch* said mattered. And he never said a bad word about people who put him down.

• • •

“Now you will be beneficiaries of that *gevurah*, as he stands before the *Kisei Hakavod* and says, as he said for so many years on Yamim Nora’im, ‘*Hineni he’ani mi’maas...* I come to plead with You on behalf of *amcha Yisrael*.’”

Reb Shlomo Yehuda reflected that his father-in-law’s life showed that the *mitzvah* of *B’tzedek tishpot amisecha* “is a *mitzvas ase* just like *tefillin* or Shabbos. To judge with integrity, even if one will be hurt in the process, is not a matter of choice — it is the will of Hashem.”

As Rav of Camp Agudah, his son-in-law said of Harav Belsky, “every one of those kids was his.” Each child was “*el hanaar hazeh hispal-alti*,” every one of them mattered.

Reb Shlomo Yehuda referenced the Torah’s account of Yaakov Avinu’s fear that there might be some blemish in his family, causing the *nevuah* to leave him. His children called out the words of *Shema Yisrael*, assuring him that, just as

in his heart there was belief in only one Hashem, so too in theirs. *Meforshim* explain that it was the fact that Yaakov was so strong in his belief in *Hashem echad* that strengthened his children’s awareness and belief of that truth. So, too, was the *Rosh Yeshivah's* living example the greatest *chinuch* with which he could gift his children.

Rabbi Tzvi Belsky, another son of the *niftar*, expressed the family’s deep thanks to individuals who contributed significantly to the well-being of Harav Belsky and, *ybl”c*, his esteemed Rebbetzin, who was the devoted *ezer k’negdo*, enabling him to accomplish all he did: Doctors Joshua and Moshe Kerstein and Dr. Neil Ringel; Reb Yitzchak Greenberg, a *musmach* of the *Rosh Yeshivah* who served as his exemplary personal *gabbai* for the past several years; Reb Aryeh Belsky, who was always there to help with whatever his parents needed; and Rebbetzin Sara Hindy Gross, who “left no stone unturned” in managing her father’s medical care.

Reb Tzvi spoke of his great father’s life as one of “*Tzama nafshi l’Elokim*,” a lifetime *shiras haTorah*. “His world was huge, and Torah enveloped everything.”

Mi yiten lanu temuraso?

Excerpts From *Hespeidim* in Yerushalayim



Harav Yitzchak Scheiner
at the *Levayah* at
Kamenitz Yeshivah



Harav Lazer Yudel Finkel



Harav Binyamin Carlebach



Harav Reuven Feinstein



Rabbi Reuven Cohen



Rabbi Dovid Goldstein

At the *Levayah* at the Mirrer Yeshivah in Yerushalayim

HAMODIA STAFF

Like a diamond, Harav Yisroel Belsky, *zt"l*, was comprised of a multitude of facets. And each of the *maspidim* at the *levayah* in Yerushalayim focused on a different facet of his life.

The first *maspid*, Harav Lazer Yehuda Finkel, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Mir Yerushalayim, bemoaned the loss of a *Gadol* who was beyond our grasp.

"How can we comprehend such all-encompassing greatness? The

Gemara in *Sotah* says, 'When Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzreidah and Yosi ben Yochanan of Yerushalayim died, the *eshkolos* ceased.' The *Gemara* asks, what does *eshkolos* mean? It is a blend of three words — *ish shehakol bo* — a person who encompasses everything. Rashi explains that this means a person who combines all areas of Torah, in all its absolute truth; flawless, indisputable ... a person who is an authority in the entire Torah."

Such a person was Rav Belsky. He reigned supreme in so many fields; every move of his was *Shulchan Aruch*.

And with it all, he made the time to be a father and friend to every *talmid*.

Harav Boruch Dov Povarsky, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Ponevezh, spoke of *Mattan Torah*. The giving of the Torah was accompanied by the sound of the *shofar*. *Chazal* call the Torah *imrei shofar* — words of the *shofar*. Torah was given with a *shofar*. What is the significance? Every other wisdom we acquire with our heads. Torah we only acquire with heart, not the head. *V'hasheivosa el levavecha*. You can't learn Torah without an open heart. *Chochmah* in Torah is *yiras Shamayim*. And real *yiras Shamayim* comes only with *anavah*. Torah only comes to someone who has *yirah* and *anavah*.

When Hillel was *niftar*, what great praises did his colleagues say about him? *Hei chassid, hei anav* — How humble, how pious. That was it.

The Maharsha asks, was that all they could say about Hillel? Just "humble" and "pious"? He explains that *chassid* and *anav* are at the pinnacle of the steps toward *ruach hakodesh*. They are next to the highest rung of spiritual achievement as spelled out in the *Braisa* of Rabi Pinchas ben Yair in *Avodah Zarah*. And Hillel reached the top.

The world has lost such a person.

Harav Reuven Feinstein, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah*, Yeshiva of Staten Island, spoke of the great loss that we have yet to fully appreciate.

The loss of Rav Yisroel Belsky was a tremendous one to all the institutions that depended on him: Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, the Orthodox Union, Camp Agudah, Vaad L'hatzolas Nidchei Yisrael and all the others. But, the truth is, he will be replaced at all those organizations. No one could do what he did but, by necessity, they will have to find someone to take the position, even if he can't fill the position.

But the loss to *Klal Yisrael* is irreparable.

Rav Belsky was a role model, not just because of what he taught, but because of how he lived. He lived

Torah and *mitzvos* with a *geshmak*, encouraging others to want to do the same because Torah and *mitzvos* gave so much genuine pleasure.

...

Harav Binyamin Carlebach, *shlita*, *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Mir Yerushalayim, spoke with deep *hakaras hatov* for Rav Belsky's selfless devotion to *Klal Yisrael*, not only his own *mosdos*. Rav Belsky understood the *tachlis ha'adam*. He knew it was never about him. He took *achrayus* not only for his own *mosad* but encouraged Reb Yaakov Melohn to dedicate himself to helping the Mirrer Yeshiva in Yerushalayim. He enabled and inspired incredible *hach'zakas haTorah*.

...

Harav Reuven Cohen, *shlita*, *Rosh Kollel*, Kiryat Sefer, and son-in-law of the *niftar*, brokenheartedly cried, "How could you leave me? We're still in the middle ... Now I have lost my second father..."

Rav Cohen once asked Rav Belsky how many times he finished *Shas*.

"There is no *cheshbon*."

He didn't keep count. He was perpetually learning and learning more.

"He was not only my father-in-law," Rav Cohen said. "He was not only my *rebbe*. He was my friend."

...

Rabbi Dovid Goldstein, *Maggid Shiur* at Torah Vodaath and a son-in-law of the *niftar*, said, "I don't think it's possible to give a proper *hesped*."

He explained that there is simply too much to say. Just as a person doesn't realize how important every limb of his body is unless, *chas v'shalom*, he loses it, similarly, we don't appreciate the loss of such a *tzaddik*. It will take time for it to sink in.

For 30 years he raised the standards of *kashrus* so people would be able to eat without any questions. But for himself, he didn't have to eat. He was too busy helping *Klal Yisrael* to eat. His life was for and about *Klal Yisrael*.

Yehi zichro baruch.

At the *levayah* in Yerushalayim.

