Rabbi YY Jacobson sparks the genuine seeker inside us all.

BUILT TO LAST
An innovative curriculum primes young builders for life.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD
Stroke by tenuous stroke, an estranged artist etched a new self-portrait.

SPICE AND SPIRIT
These snuffboxes hold a whiff of times gone by.

EndNote
Never feel abandoned — your Father’s at your side.

RABBI MOSHE GRYLAK
The kippah resting on your head speaks volumes of your heart.

LIFELINES
Were we seeking trophies, or shidduchim for our kids?

Master of all holy trades
Mourning Rav Yisroel Belsky.
A tribute to Rav Yisroel Belsky, rosh yeshivah of Torah Vodaath and renowned posek

BY Rabbi Yehuda Heimowitz
PHOTOS Shulim Goldring, JDN, Mattis Goldberg, Torah Vodaath archives
One scene will forever remain etched in my memory.

It was Thursday night before Succos, and a line of people extended outside Rav Belsky’s home, waiting to show him their esrogim. Two Hatzolah members were sitting at his table with their two-way radios. They had toiled to draw diagrams of the transistors in those radios so Rav Belsky could determine whether it was halachically permissible to lower and raise the volume on Shabbos. Rav Belsky corrected their drawings to show them the correct configuration before ruling on the sh’ailah. A talmid was sitting on the couch with a pack of balloons, a mohel’s shield, and some other paraphernalia, practicing to perform his own son’s bris milah the next morning, under Rav Belsky’s guidance. During those very moments, two phone calls came in—one relating to a kashrus issue and one relating to a get.

— a talmid, Baruch Travitsky

The once complimentary phrase, “He’s a jack-of-all-trades,” is now often turned into a paraprodsokian gibe with the addition of: “but a master of none.” There are people who become good at many different things, but don’t excel in any of them. And then there was Rav Chaim Yisroel HaLevi Belsky ztz”l, who learned every field of beit kodesh — and beyond — and mastered them all.

The pre-Succos scene at the Belsky home painted so vividly by talmid Baruch Travitsky would be amazing even if it captured Rav Belsky using every one of his talents, but in reality, the skills he was using that evening represented a mere smattering of his prodigious gifts.

Yes, he was able to answer sh’eilos in every basic area of halachah; he could serve as a mohel and supervise milah, he understood the science behind food, technology, medicine, and many other areas, enabling him to rule with little hesitation on complex issues such as kashrus and gittin. But Rav Belsky was also rosh yeshivah of Torah Vodaath, the beloved rav of the Kensington community; an av beis din who restored dignity and trust to the beis din process; the premier authority on kashrus issues in the OU; the rav of Camp Agudah; a sofer, shochet, baal korei, and baal tefillah on Yamim Noraim; and perhaps the world expert on the astronomical calculations necessary to understand sugyos in Eiruvin and related to Kiddush Hachodesh. And that is only a partial list of his facets.

Yet despite his obvious genius, Rav Belsky’s thousands of talmidim and campers will remember him most for his patience, for his love of every talmid, and for his willingness to sacrifice his own dignity and wellbeing for the sake of anyone in need.
A Yeshivah for Life  Originally named just Yisroel, Rav Belsky was born in New York 77 years ago to Rav Berl and Rebbetzin Chana Tzirel, a daughter of Reb Binyomin Wilhelm, who was the founder of Torah Vodaath. Reb Binyomin singlehandedly decided to reverse the trend of public-school education for Jewish children by creating his own full-day yeshivah. In America of 1918, the idea was considered so ridiculous that one balabos he approached for help pointed to his palm and said, “When hair grows here, there will be a yeshivah in Williamsburg.” But Reb Binyomin persevered, building first an elementary school, then a beis medrash, and finally a beis medrash. As Hoshanah Rabbah would have it, one of the stars of his new yeshivah was one Berl Belsky, who eventually learned in Radin. The Chofetz Chaim was so taken that a boy would leave the luxury of America to study Torah that he would hold the youngster’s hand and exclaim, “fahm Amerika, fahm Amerika!”

When Reb Berl returned to the United States, he married Reb Binyomin’s daughter, establishing the childhood home of the future rosh yeshivah of Torah Vodaath.

There is no question that young Yisroel was blessed with extraordinary genius. But in those days — as Rav Elia Katz, who served alongside Rav Belsky as menachem of the Torah Vodaath beis medrash for several decades, recounted at the leshuvah — a child growing up in America used every ounce of intellect, talent, and skill at his disposal to make money.

The eighth-grade graduates in Torah Vodaath would traditionally write where they envisioned themselves going for high school, post-high school, and what they saw themselves doing for a living. Yisroel Belsky wrote that he was planning to attend Torah Yadaath and Beis Midrash Elyon. But rather than spend his life studying those subjects to support his family, Rav Belsky used them to notice Hashem in every aspect of Creation, by understanding His handiwork to those responsible explaining his desire to study Talmud at Beis Midrash Elyon. The state made an exception and allowed him to learn for one year before starting college.

At the end of his first year in Beis Midrash Elyon, he wrote to the state again, asking for a second deferal. This time, he was turned down. He wrote a beautiful letter thanking them for their offer of a scholarship, but explaining that his Talmud studies took priority. Some time later he received another letter stating that the scholarship committee had met and decided to make an official policy change from then on and allow those who wanted to study Talmud to defer their college scholarships. Years later, Rav Belsky met someone who worked in the Department of Education, and he remembered Israel Belsky’s name being mentioned in the official protocol of those meetings.

Rav Yisroel Reisman, who observed Rav Belsky for over 40 years in Torah Vodaath — as a bochur, then in the halfei, then as a maggid shuir; and eventually as one of the roshyeshivah — recalls that when he was in 12th grade in the 1970s, Rav Belsky showed those letters to his class, demonstrating his difficult choice to sacrifice a free college education to pursue full-time learning — and conveying that they could do it too.

“So what did our father get for staying in yeshivah instead of going to college?” asks Reb Tzvi Belsky. “He got Torah, Nevium, Kesuvim, Mishnah, Talmud Babli, Talmud Yerushalmi, Midrash, Rishonim, Achronim, the four sections of Shulchan Aruch…

“But you know what else he got? Biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy, anatomy, physiology, history, poetry, and the list goes on and on — although I never once saw my father study anything besides Torah.”

And rather than spend his life studying those subjects as a matter of curiosity or to support his family, Rav Belsky used them all for the service of Hashem — but most of all, to notice Hashem in every aspect of Creation, and to teach thousands upon thousands to love Hashem by understanding His handiwork.

Rather than spend his life studying those subjects to support his family, Rav Belsky used them to notice Hashem in every aspect of Creation, by understanding His handiwork.
Half a Century of Chinuch

Rav Elya Brudny, rosh yeshivah of the Mirrer Yeshivah in Brooklyn, still remembers the day when Rav Belsky first began laying some of the Torah he had mastered. “When our rebbi, the Rosh Yeshivah Rav Zelik Epstein zt”l, fell ill, Rav Belsky was summoned back from Beis Midrash Elyon by Rav Yaakov Kamnetzky to deliver shiur for our grade. We were already in first year beis medrash, a group of accomplished 18-year-olds, many of whom would become accomplished talmidei chachamim.

“For over five decades, I thought that he was in his mid-70s when he delivered those high-level shiurim on Eilei Metzios, turning that period into a particularly successful zmanim. Even that would have been an impressive feat, considering that he was substituting for one of the great rosh yeshivah. Only when he was niftar, and they said he was 77, did it dawn on me that he was a mere 25-years old at the time! I can’t say for certain, but it’s quite possible that that was the only time in the history of American yeshivos in which a 25-year-old who wasn’t even a father yet gave shiur for beis medrash bochurim.”

From that year onward, Rav Belsky would remain a maggid shiur in Torah Vodaath, a chinuch career that spanned more than half a century. In those 52 years, he taught all the different parts of Torah: yyun (in-depth), bekius (learned at a simpler level and faster pace), and the specialty area of halachah. During lunch break he also taught a daf yomi shiur at a rapid clip. Incredibly, he was able to teach a full daf in less than half an hour, and even young teenagers were able to follow along.

In addition, he offered a practical halachah shiur during the break period, open to anyone. His presentation was so clear and enjoyable that you barely felt like you were learning something difficult. On the Shabbos between his petirah and levayah, as I was setting up the chalos for homeshei, I froze as I suddenly realized that I was following the halachically prescribed manner I learned in room 206 in Torah Vodaath during breakfast.

Even his weekly sessions in the OU, where he supervised kashrus certification, were teaching opportunities. The talmidim who would accompany him were part of the halachic discussions. “The worst thing a talmid could do was not ask if he didn’t understand something,” says Rabbi Elyi Gersten, who coordinated those sessions. “Sometimes Rav Belsky would walk to them and say, ‘You understood what we were talking about?’ If they got a sheepish look on their faces he would say, ‘So why didn’t you ask?!’ He would then start from the beginning and explain the entire process in great detail, making sure they understood each step.”

Later in life, Rav Belsky decided that the yeshivah needed a solid Choshen Mishpat shiur. And the Choshen Mishpat shiur he delivered on Monday nights became his pride and joy — and he wouldn’t miss it unless it was absolutely impossible to be there. His oldest son, Rav Aryeh, remembers a Monday night event at which his brother-in-law, Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz, was guest of honor. Long before Reb Shlomo Yehuda’s scheduled speech, Rav Belsky rose and made for the door. “Where are you going?” Rav Aryeh asked. “I need to go give the Choshen Mishpat shiur,” Rav Belsky replied, heading toward the exit.

When Reb Shlomo Yehuda saw his father-in-law leaving, he asked the organization to shuffle the program to place his speech next. “By that time,” recalls Rav Aryeh, “my father was already at the door, ready to head back for the Choshen Mishpat shiur. I had run to tell him that they had arranged for him to be able to hear Shlomo Yehuda speak.”

Show, Not Tell

While no one denies that Rav Belsky was gifted with a prodigious intellect, his family and colleagues describe a mind-boggling degree of hutzpah.

“How did our father teach us to learn?” commented his son Rav Aryeh. “He didn’t tell us to go learn. We saw all he did when he had time was learn.

“We would go to Prospect Park on a family trip, and while we ran around, he sat in the grass with a Gemara. Once, I missed a family trip. That night, he took me on a train to visit the World Trade Center. He took me up onto the observation deck and pointed out all the stars. But before and after, we learned.”

With fellow rosh yeshivah Rav Yosef Savitsky and Rav Yisroel Reisman. Rav Belsky never stopped teaching, be it yyun, bekius, daf yomi during lunch break, or practical halachah during breakfast.

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He knew everything about everything. (Top to bottom) If you rolled out matzah according to his system, it would come out perfectly; he taught himself Russian in order to connect with newly arrived immigrants; he showed his students the intricacies of shechitah; and kept campers captivated with lessons in science and astronomy.

trip. That night, he took me on a train, late at night, to visit the World Trade Center. He took me up onto the observation deck and pointed out all the stars. But before and after, we learned.

Although it certainly helped, Rav Belsky’s memory was not the key to his ability to teach so many different Torah subjects at once. He earned that ability the hard way — reviewing everything he learned numerous times. Baruch Travitsky relates that Rav Belsky’s son Rav Elimelech was his robbi in Camp Ohr Shraga, Torah Vodaath’s learning camp. In encouraging the hochurim to shuch (study), he related that his father told him, “The 40th time you learn Maseches Yevamos does not compare to the 41st. The questions and chiddushei that I came up with on my 41st time far outshine the ones I had on time number 40.”

“He loved every bit of Torah knowledge he could gain,” recounts Rabbi Reisman. “And he learned everything in depth. There was no such thing as saying, ‘Oh, it’s a shilul Hashi [where Rashi discusses a grammatical point], let’s just read the words and go on.’ He had to understand every word.”

That insatiable thirst for Torah knowledge meant that Rav Belsky left no stone unturned. Rabbi Reisman relates that when his famous Motza'i Shabbos Navi shiur was reaching the portion describing the Beis Arazim, the palace Shirzom built for himself, he searched far and wide for a picture to use as a visual aid, but he came up empty-handed.

“I finally approached an architect and asked him to draw one for me, and we worked hard to get it right. I took it to Rav Belsky to make sure it was accurate. When I explained why I had this created from scratch, he said, ‘It’s a shame you didn’t come to me sooner,’ and he pulled out his own rendering of the Beis Arazim.”

The same held true of the various vessels discussed in Maseches Keilim. Today there are numerous picture books on Keilim, but Rabbi Reisman recalls Rav Belsky having created his own renderings, which are, as of yet, unpublished.

“When a person gets onto an airplane,” says Rabbi Reisman, “he takes along a softer that is moshech es halin, something that is guaranteed to hold his interest. Someone told me that he was on a ten-hour flight with Rav Belsky, and he used the time to learn Talmud Yerushalmi.”

Perhaps the ability to learn the cryptic Yerushalmi on a flight explains a story told by Rav Bension Beren, a son-in-law of Rav Belsky. He recounts that on the day of his engagement, Rebbetzin Belsky noted that her engagement had arrived late that day. “Oh, I was making a siyum on Yerushalmi,” Rav Belsky explained without an ounce of fanfare, and Rebbezten Belsky accepted his statement as if it was not all that unique.

The Practical Side

One of the areas in which Rav Belsky stood head and shoulders above the rest — and that was quite literal for someone whose towering shoulders above the rest — and that was quite literal for someone whose towering height was a mere shadow of his spiritual greatness — was the ability to apply his encyclopedic Torah knowledge to practical halachah. All of Klal Yisrael benefited from the spiritual protection of his Torah learning; as Rav Yitzchok Shein- er, rosh yeshiva of Kamenitz and one of the elder Torah authorities in the world, recalled, Rav Eliyashiv zt”l would rise when Rav Belsky, nearly three decades his junior, walked into the room. But they also reaped hands-on benefits from his expertise in kashrus.

For nearly 30 years, Rav Belsky served as one of the two halachic consultants for the Orthodox Union’s kashrus division, along-side Rav Hershel Schachter. Rabbi Menachem Genack, CEO of OU Kosher, wistfully recalls how Rav Belsky, nearly three decades his junior, walked into the room. But they also reaped hands-on benefits from his expertise in kashrus.

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Genack explained how Rav Belsky was also responsible for the preservation of the mezuzah on nikkur, removing the ged haneshos, in deer. After clarifying the halachic issues with Rav Eliyashiv, he scoured the world for one abochen in Eretz Yisrael who had a menusha on nikkur, and eventually taught it to the employees of a slaughterhouse in Goshen, New York, where Rav Belsky also helped design the pens in which to sheid the deer in the most humane way.

But the same Rav Belsky would not allow a factory to get away with leniencies if it was just an issue of spending money to make something more Isha’telhah. Rabbi Genack recounts an instance in which a company could install a few hundred feet of tubing, at a cost of 800 dollars, which would make the operation preferable.

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When others protested that there were other agencies that would certify the factory without the changes, Rav Belsky offered to give them the number of one such agency. He felt no need to compete, only to ensure that Jews were eating kosher.

No Jew Left Behind

In the early 1970s, long before “kiruv movement” was a phrase, JEP (Jewish Education Program) was launched to reach out to Jewish public school students and day school children from nonobservant homes. Rav Belsky served as JEP’s official rabbinic advisor, guiding a group of young Torah Vodaath beis medrash bochurim in effective mentoring.

He spearred the establishment of a chavrura program, in which students from nonobservant homes would come to a yeshivah and learn one-on-one with beis medrash bochurim. Some of the Torah Vodaath board members were concerned that onlookers might think that these “long-haired boys” were students of the yeshivah, but Rav Belsky stood firm in his support of the program and assured its success for many years.

When the Iron Curtain began to lift in the 1980s, Rav Belsky was consumed with helping the newly arrived immigrants. Being self Russian so he could converse with them, and he even conducted his Pesach Seder partly in Russian to accommodate some guests. No one knew which of the guests were Jewish, and not all of these guests appreciated the generosity they were being granted. But Rav Belsky and his Rebbeim Miriam, may Hashem send a Gibbor hahadran in our time, were heart, and gave.

And although his primary role was to serve at the poskim and run the Masmidim program for those boys in their middle teens who were ready to aportion most of their day for learning, Rav Belsky made himself available in every other way as well. One year, a group of four bunkis aged approximately 9 to 11 competed in a “hurka contest.” “How can I help?” he immediately pulled out a Tehillim and into a drawing the banner for our team, which showed me the layout of Hashem’s galaxies. He took us on a trip on a trip to Falls Poultry to watch a large-scale shechita production. Some years, he brought an animal to camp and shechted it and dissected it, highlighting the anatomy and explaining the brilliance behind Hashem’s creation.

And he was there for every individual, caring for each one as his own child.

On the last day of the summer, Rabbi Dovid Frischman, son of Agudah director Reb Meir Frischman and the director of the Masmidim program, entered Rav Belsky’s office as a young boy with a stutter was exiting, and found Rav Belsky in tears. Rav Belsky explained that at the beginning of the summer, he had offered to help cure the boy of his stutter, but the boy only showed up twice before giving up. Watching him suffer was too much for Rav Belsky to bear.

On the first day of the next summer Reb Dovid came running into Rav Belsky’s office and excitedly related that he met the boy and found him to be stutter-free! Rav Belsky just smiled in response, and Reb Dovid sensed that there was something behind that smile. Upon pressing for details, he finally discerned that Rav Belsky had worked with this boy through the winter months to cure the stutter.

The Controversies

Many of the maspidim spoke of Rav Belsky as a gadol hadar, but Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz added a new title: “We lost the gibbor hadar.”

It’s no secret that Rav Belsky was occasionally involved in halachic battles, during which his name was dragged through the mud by his opponents. Reb Shlomo Yehuda explained that Rav Belsky was not blindsided in those instances; he knew that he would be attacked. But he had a sense of justice that did not allow him to stay默默 of any person being unfairly tram-

mers. This attitude extended to every aspect of his life, and was a motivating factor in his establishing a beis to help those who were being wronged in business.

Both Rabbi Gronbach and Rav Reisman testified, in hespedim on two different continents, that each time Rav Belsky got involved in controversy, it was because he couldn’t stand the sight of someone being baisikol (wronged).

“He wasn’t controversial to be controversial,” Reb Shlomo Yehuda said. “He only spoke up because he knew that as a person who had reached hatorah, he had no choice but to rise up in defense of those being mistreated.”

In some instances, such as in the debate over the poskim. It took only, it was the push of preceding gibbor hadar that felt compelled to defend, even at the cost of rousing the ire of both Nebbok individuals who threatened him with bodily harm.

But he was a gibbor in another way as well, never taking revenge against those who badmouthed him. On the contrary — he went out of his way to help them. See-in-law Reb Dovid Goldstein told of an incident that was a prototype for many others. A businessman who was Rav Belsky’s talidim had an employee who loudly and regularly criticized his rabbi.

The employer warned him several times to stop talking that way about Rav Belsky, or he would fire him.

Finally, the day came when the fellow let his mouth run too far, and his boss fired him.

“Whom did thee approach to get his job back?” recounted Rebbe Goldstein. “My father-in-law! He told him that he had been working for a talidim of his, and that he had gotten fired. During the conversation, it became clear why he had been fired.

“My shver called his talidim and said, ‘I appreciate that you want to defend me, but if you truly want to do something for my honor, give him back his job. I don’t want a Yaal to lose parnasah because of me.”’

Near Death

Four years ago, on Motzaei Shabbos Parshas Vayosho, the 19th of Shevat, Rav Belsky rushed to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a ruptured esophagus. A relative urged him to take a top hospital in Manhattan
for the complex procedure. Although he could barely speak, Rav Belsky adamantly refused, saying that it would be an insult to the Maimonides surgeons who were already treating him. Five minutes after he was wheeled into the operating room, he went into cardiac arrest. Because he was already on the operating table and a stent “happened” to be sitting nearby, his life was saved.

Approximately a year after that miraculous recovery from a situation so precarious that Chaim was added to his name, Rav Belsky’s daughter, Mrs. Tamar Rechnitz, reflected on the decision that saved his life, telling Mishpacha, “This is my father’s essence. In any state he’s in, he’s busy thinking about everyone else.”

Just four months after the ordeal, he was able to return to yeshivah— but only because of his sheer willpower. Son Rav Aryeh recalls that the medical staff in the rehab center marveled over how hard he went at his physical therapy. “He’s doing this because he wants to get back to his lectures,” one was overheard saying.

Recently, he was zocheh to marry off Yaakov Binyamin, his ben zekunim, and his simchah at being able to dance at that wedding was described by both family and colleagues as surpassing anything they had seen. His whole life, he loved to sing, raising shiros v’tishbachos to Hashem and teaching many niggunim from yesteryear to talmidim in Torah Vodaath and Camp Agudah. But those last few years were a long, steady shirah to Hashem, noted Rav Elya Katz, in gratitude of being granted a reprieve to continue teaching Torah and to marry off the last of his 13 children.

The Caring Heart For those who forged a close connection with Rav Belsky, the impact of his probing mind is matched only by that of his warm heart. A yasom who had frequently eaten in his house landed in a yeshivah in Brooklyn, where a member of the administration unfortunately mistreated him. Rav Belsky made a trip to the yeshivah to speak to the antagonist in person, but even though he procured a promise of better treatment, it only lasted a few days. Meanwhile, this boy’s father, who was an elderly World War II veteran, was begging him to go to college. “I remember feeling caught between a rock and a hard place,” the young man remembers. “My father wanted me to leave yeshivah so much that he offered to buy me a Lexus if I would just go back to my home state and attend college, and in yeshivah I was being mistreated.”

Rav Belsky made a second trip to the yeshivah and received a second pledge that the mistreatment would stop, but this promise didn’t yield better results than the first. Finally Rav Belsky advised this boy to go to college, and guided him on his career path. This boy, who would use the career path Rav Belsky helped him choose to do loads of kiruv, remained close to Rav Belsky and considered him a second father until his petirah.

But Rav Belsky’s care and love wasn’t reserved for yosemin or those in desperate straits.

In the early 1990s, a young boy decided, at the age of 13, that he wanted to join Camp Agudah’s Masmidim program. The program was generally reserved for older boys, but this young man deluded himself into thinking that he was ready to spend the majority of his summer vacation learning. Rav Belsky tried to gently convey to the camper that perhaps it wasn’t the best choice for him just yet. But the boy wouldn’t be deterred.

By the time the first half of the summer was over, after struggling with a schedule way beyond the capabilities of his age, the camper realized that Rav Belsky was right. Not quite understanding how Rav Belsky worked, though, he feared facing the Rosh Yeshivah, certain that he would be berated for having forced his way into a program that he wasn’t ready for. To his surprise, when he explained to Rav Belsky that he felt that he needed a change of pace for the second half, Rav Belsky didn’t issue one word of criticism. In fact, he launched into a long speech of praise.

“I don’t want you to look back at this trip as a mistake,” he said. “You gained so much from this half. You learned so many hours. You saw the niflaos haBorei in the stars with us. You climbed up a mountain and davened b’hashkamah.

“You should know,” he concluded, “that life is a mountain, the har Hashem, and you have to keep on climbing.”

Rebbi, nearly 25 years have passed since that day when, in the warm cocoon of your office in the Masmidim beis medrash, you built me up instead of allowing me to skulk away feeling like a failure. And I’m certain I represent thousands of talmidim when I say: Rebbi, thanks to you, I’m still climbing.”

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