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REPORT**

החפץ

Mishpacha

JEWISH FAMILY WEEK

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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?

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Mourning Rav Yisroel Belsky



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Mishpacha

master *of all* holy trades

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'eilah*. 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

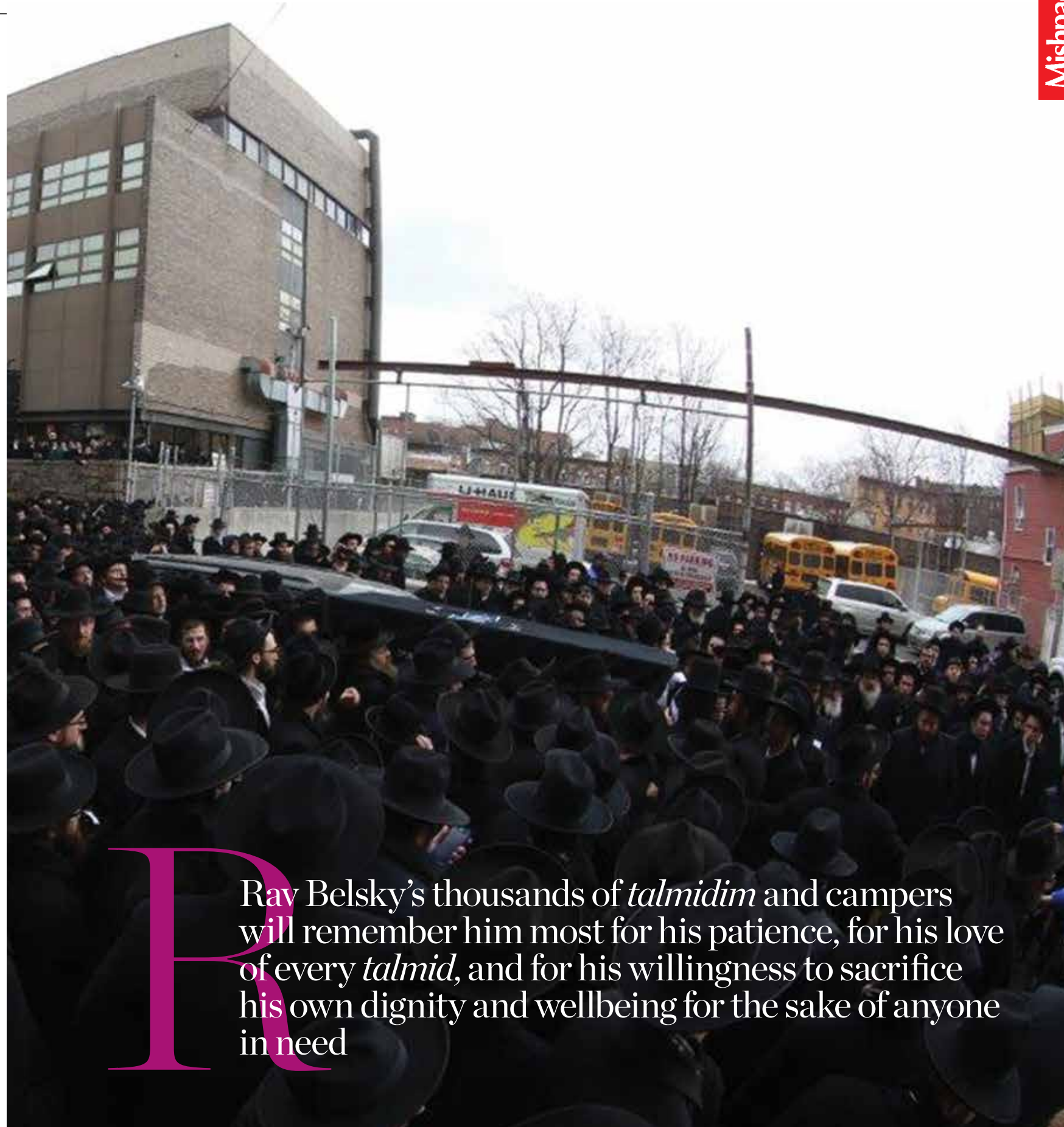
The once complimentary phrase, “He’s a jack-of-all-trades,” is now often turned into a paraprodokian gibe with the addition of: “but a master of none.” There are people who become *good* at many different things, but don’t excel in any of them. And then there was Rav Chaim Yisroel HaLevi Belsky *ztz”l*,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

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 Binyamin persevered, building first an elementary school, then a *mesivta*, and finally a *beis medrash*.

As *Hashgachah* 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, “*fuhn America, fuhn America!*”

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 Elya Katz, who served alongside Rav Belsky as *menahel* of the Torah Vodaath *beis medrash* for several decades, recounted at the *levayah* — 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 Vodaath and Beis Midrash Elyon, and eventually make a living as a musician.

He graduated high school with such spectacular grades that the state of New York offered him a full college scholarship. The rule at the time was “use it or lose it”; the state would not accept any deferrals. But he wrote a letter

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 deferral. 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 *kollel*, then as a *maggid shiur*, and eventually as one of the *roshei yeshivah* — 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, Neviim, Kesuvim, Mishnah, Talmud Bavli, 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.



For over half a century, Rav Belsky left no stone unturned — in boosting his encyclopedic knowledge and in caring for the *klal*. (Clockwise from top left) With Agudah’s Rabbi Moshe Sherer; introducing campers to the Bluzhever Rebbe ztz”l in the summer of 1985; the skeleton of Torah Vodaath’s new building; in a 1983 meeting with *roshei yeshivah* Rav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman ztz”l and Rav Avrohom Pam ztz”l; with his *rebbe muvhak*, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky ztz”l

Half a Century of Chinuch Rav Elya Brudny, *rosh yeshivah* of the Mirror Yeshivah in Brooklyn, still remembers the day when Rav Belsky first began re-laying some of the Torah he had mastered. “When our *rebbe*, the Rosh Yeshivah Rav Zelik Epstein *ztz”l*, fell ill, Rav Belsky was summoned back from Beis Midrash Elyon by Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky 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-30s when he delivered those high-level *shiurim* on *Eilu Metzios*, turning that period into a particularly successful *zman*. Even that would have been an impressive feat, considering that he was substituting for one of the great *roshei 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: *iyun* (in-depth), *bekius* (learned at a simpler level and faster pace), and the specialty area of halachah. During lunch break he also taught a *dafyomi 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 breakfast 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 *keivurah*, as I was setting up the challos for *hamotzi*, I froze as I suddenly realized that I was following the halachically prescribed manner I’d learned in room 206 in Torah Vodaath during breakfast.

Even his weekly sessions in the OU, where he supervised kashrus certification, were



With fellow *roshei yeshivah* Rav Yosef Savitsky and Rav Yisroel Reisman. Rav Belsky never stopped teaching, be it *iyun*, *bekius*, *dafyomi* during lunch break, or practical halachah during breakfast

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 Eli Gersten, who coordinated those sessions. “Sometimes Rav Belsky would turn 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.”

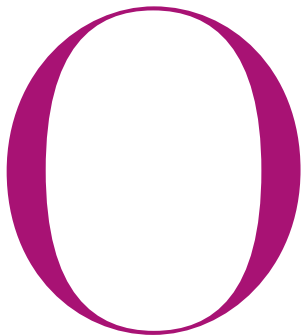
Later in life, Rav Belsky decided that the yeshivah needed a solid *Choshen Mishpat chaburah*. And the *Choshen Mishpat shiur* he delivered on Monday nights became his pride and joy — and he wouldn’t miss it unless it was absolutely impossible to be there. His oldest son, Rav Aryeh, remembers a Monday 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 to 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 *hasmadah*.

“How did our father teach us to learn?” commented his son Rav Avraham. “He didn’t *tell* us to go learn. We saw that 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



“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”

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 *rebbe* in Camp Ohr Shraga, Torah Vodaath’s learning camp. In encouraging the *bochurim* to *chazer* (review), he related that his father told him, “The 40th time you learn *Maseches Yevamos* does not compare to the 41st. The questions and *chiddushim* that I came up with on my 41st time far outshone 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 *dikduk* Rashi [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 Motzaei Shabbos Navi *shiur* was reaching the portion describing the Beis Arazim, the palace Shlomo 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 *sefer* that is *mosheches haleiv*, 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 Benzion Beren, a son-in-law of Rav Belsky. He recalled that on the day of his engagement, Rebbetzin Belsky noted that her husband had arrived late that day. “Oh, I was making a *siyum* on Yerushalmi,” Rav Belsky explained without an ounce of fanfare, and Rebbetzin 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 physical 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 Sheiner, *rosh yeshivah* of Kamenitz and one of the elder Torah authorities in the world, recalled, Rav Elyashiv *ztz”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, alongside Rav Hershel Schachter. Rabbi Menachem Genack, CEO of OU Kosher, wistfully recalls the scene as Rav Belsky visited the OU each week with *talmidim* from Torah Vodaath to whom he would give *shimush*, hands-on experience in *psak halachah*.

Kashrus was one of the areas in which Rav Belsky was able to put his vast secular

knowledge to use for the benefit of the Jewish People. Son-in-law Rav Dovid Goldstein surmises that there’s not a *frum* Jew in the world who has not benefited from Rav Belsky’s kashrus prowess. Just consider that the OU certifies over half a million products, produced in approximately 9,000 factories in over 80 countries, and that every other kashrus agency relies on the OU for the basic chemical components that go into their products — and no one was able to understand how to certify those ingredients as Rav Belsky did.

Furthermore, no one in the world matched his technical knowledge of the factories’ inner workings and their halachic ramifications. Rabbi Eli Gersten recalls Rav Belsky getting on the phone with the factory foremen and discussing the factory as though he had built it. He would suggest how to reconfigure the machinery so the OU could certify their products. “He brought with him the experience of having seen many more industrial factories than any one foreman or supervisor. And once he saw a factory, he remembered it forever, so that he was able to help a different factory recreate what he had previously seen elsewhere.”

Speaking to thousands at the *levayah*, Rabbi Genack revealed that if not for Rav Belsky’s *kocha d’heteira*, *frum* Jews would likely not eat fish today.

Son-in-law Rav Yaakov Gross and Rabbi Genack explained how Rav Belsky was also responsible for the preservation of the *mesorah* on *nikur*, removing the *gid hanasheh*, in deer. After clarifying the halachic issues with Rav Elyashiv, he scoured the world for one *shochet* in Eretz Yisrael who had a *mesorah* on *nikur*, 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 *shecht* 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 *l’chatchilah*. Rabbi Gersten recounts an instance in which a company could install a few hundred feet of tubing, at a cost of \$100,000, which would make the operation preferable.

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 spurred the establishment of a *chavrusa* 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 for 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. He taught himself 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 Rebbetzin Miriam, may Hashem send her a *refuah sheleimah*, were all heart, and gave unconditionally to anyone who crossed their threshold, even the mentally unstable and other unfortunate people who found a safe haven in the Belsky household.

Rav Belsky was also the anonymous catalyst who instructed Rabbi Mutty Katz of JEP to take a leave of absence and open a school for Russian children. When Reb Mutty asked what he should call the yeshivah, Rav Belsky thought for a moment and said, “Be’er Hago-lah.” With Rav Belsky’s constant advice and support, less than a year later, the school grew



A scholar’s scholar. With Rav Yisrael Meir Lau, Mir Rosh Yeshivah Rav Eliezer Yehuda (Leizer Yudel) Finkel, and with Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky

so large that a group of community leaders had to take over the reins to ensure its continued success.

No Airs For all his genius and all his myriad responsibilities, Rav Belsky had absolutely no airs about him, which made him very approachable. Those who attended Camp Agudah 20-plus years ago can remember him playing paddleball, showing the entire camp that exercise is important for a *ben Torah*. To campers and young staff members alike, it seemed only natural that Rav Belsky would be there among us. It took no less a personage than Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky, *rosh yeshivah* of Philadelphia and a son of Rav Yaakov — Rav Belsky’s *rebbe muvhak* — to note at the *levayah* that it took great *mesirus nefesh* for Rav Belsky to give up his summers so that he could be a positive influence on the boys.

And although his primary role was to serve as the *posek* and run the Masmidim program for those boys in their middle teens who were ready to apportion most of their day for learning, Rav Belsky made himself available in every other way as well. One year, a group of four bunks aged approximately 9 to 11 competed in a “bunk color war.” Somehow, I was corralled into a drawing the banner for our team, which was named Chesed. How could I decide what to draw and how to draw it? Simple — go to Rav Belsky. The fact that at nine years old, I had the pluck to knock on his office door at the back of the Masmidim *beis medrash* to ask something so inconsequential is a testimony not to my courage, but to his lack of pretension, which invited questions from even the youngest child. He immediately pulled out a Tehillim and showed me the *pasuk*, “*Olam chesed yibaneh*,” explained the concept, and provided a detailed description of how to draw it.

Far more beautiful banners have been drawn in Camp Agudah over the years, but the concept of that one particular piece was perfect.

The Masmidim campers were treated to a special connection with Rav Belsky, not only during his daily *shiurim* and special biweekly

afternoon sessions — in which he would answer questions submitted anonymously, displaying that the Torah has answers for everything — but also during his famous walks after the close of Shivah Asar B’Tammuz and Tishah B’Av, in which he would shine his long flashlight up toward the stars and point out the layout of Hashem’s galaxies. He took us on a trip to Falls Poultry to watch a large-scale *shechitah* production. Some years, he brought an animal to camp and *shechted* 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.

Once, on the last day of camp, 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 hador*, but Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz added a new title: “We lost the *gibbor hador*.”

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 watch a person being unfairly trampled. This attitude extended to every aspect

of his life, and was a motivating factor in his establishing a *beis din* to help those who were being wronged in business.

Both Rabbi Genack 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 *ba’avelt* (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 *horaah*, he had no choice but to rise up in defense of those being mistreated.”

In some instances, such as in the debate over the *eiruv* in Brooklyn, it was the *psak* of preceding *gedolei hador* that he felt compelled to defend, even at the cost of rousing the ire of hotheaded individuals who threatened him with bodily harm.

But he was a *gibbor* in another way as well, never taking revenge against those who bad-mouthed him. On the contrary — he went out of his way to help them. Son-in-law Reb Dovid Goldstein told of an incident that was a prototype for many others. A businessman who was Rav Belsky’s *talmid* had an employee who loudly and regularly criticized his *rebbe*. 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 he approach to get his job back?” recounted Rabbi Goldstein. “My father-in-law! He told him that he had been working for a *talmid* of his, and that he had gotten fired. During the conversation, it became clear why he had been fired.

“My *shver* called his *talmid* 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 Yid to lose *parnassah* because of me.’”

Near Death Four years ago, on Motzaei Shabbos Parshas Yisro, the 19th of Shevat, Rav Belsky was rushed to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a ruptured esophagus. Some relatives urged him to transfer to a top hospital in Manhattan

Master of All Holy Trades

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,



Being able to dance at the wedding of his *ben zekunim* after his own harrowing battle for life was his greatest *simchah*. Rav Belsky with the *chassan* and his son-in-law Reb Shlomo Yehuda Rechnitz

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 *yesomim* 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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