

Ben Azzai of East 9th Street

A Tribute to Rebbe from a Talmid

Klal Yisroel mourns the loss of one of its brightest lights, HaRav Chaim Yisroel Belsky, ZT”L. I am a Talmid of the Rav, having attended his Meseches Chulin shiur at Yeshiva Torah Vo’Daas in 1983. Thus, with respect, I take the liberty of referring to HaRav Belsky as simply Rebbe, in the way I and my Chaverim related to him way back then and how I most remember him.

I make no claims of having had a close kesher to Rebbe when I was in the Yeshiva, nor of actively maintaining the relationship after I left the precious Koslei Bais Hamedrash. However, I have the fondest memories of my time learning with Rebbe and in particular, I cherish some of the creative and novel Divrei Drush he shared with us on those occasions we weren’t otherwise occupied with the technical halachic, physiological and lomdishe nitty gritty details which characterized the Mesechta.

Rebbe had a pre-shiur ritual which I found strangely mesmerizing. He always entered the classroom with a clear glass mug, filled with cold water. Methodically and deliberately, he took out an old fashioned immersing element from his desk drawer, plugged it into the electric socket behind his chair and ceremoniously inserted the elaborate spiral metal end into the mug. I fancied this ritual as a subtle metaphor for the activity we were about to engage in, immersing ourselves into the waters of Torah and percolating new ideas that would fire up our intellects while warming our souls. Then again, Rebbe may just have liked a good hot tea to start his day.

Waiting for the water to boil, Rebbe would, at times, regale us with some novel homily that for us Semicha candidates might heighten our sensitivity to the poetry and poignant lessons for life that can often be found in the most mundane of Talmudic statements. Of course, Rebbe’s multi-faceted mastery of Torah helped in this endeavor.

One such Dvar Drush I remember to this day for its poetic beauty, originality and general message which made a strong impression on me. I believe it provides a glimpse into the mindset of Rebbe and the values he endeavored to impart to his Talmidim.

Rebbe opened the discussion with a provocative question; what sets the Gadol apart from the common man? How does he achieve greatness while others settle into mediocrity?

Rebbe introduced his approach with a Gemara that for its brevity and obscurity might easily escape attention. The Gemara in Eruvin 29a quotes the great Amora Rava who came into the Beis Medrash one fine day and announced with a flourish, “Hareni K’Ben Azai B’Shukei Tveryah!” “I am like the great Ben Azai in the marketplaces of Tveryah!” Rashi explains, that Ben Azai, a Tanna who lived several hundred years before Rava, was renowned as the sharpest mind of his day, able to intellectually uproot mountains of Torah knowledge and expound upon them in the marketplaces of his hometown Tveryah, answering any query presented to him. In fact Ben Azai said of himself that all of the sages, compared to him, are like a thin garlic peel!

So too, Rava felt particularly good-hearted and clear-headed that day and challenged all of his colleagues and students to ask him any difficult questions they might have.

A bold young Rabbinic student rose to the challenge and queried Rava, “Tapuchin B’Kamma? - With what quantity of apples may one prepare an Eruv Techumin?”

Rava confidently countered, “Ve’Chi MeArvin B’Tapuchin?! – Are apples altogether qualified for preparation of an Eruv?!”

The Gemara quickly parried, “V’Lo?! - Why not?” handily adducing Mishnaic proof that apples can be used for an Eruv, thus dispensing with Rava’s premise.

It is left to Rav Nachman to finally resolve the original question regarding apple quantities, while Rava is nary heard from again in this exchange, presumably having retreated to some hidden corner of the Beis Medrash to lick the wounds of a punctured ego.

Rebbe asked the obvious question: How could this happen?! How could Rava, in one moment, throw down the intellectual gauntlet only to find himself bested in the very first round? Whatever became of his self-proclaimed “Ben Azai” moment?

One could simply suggest that perhaps the Gemara is highlighting this very pointed lesson, that braggadocio will inevitably and swiftly be met with ignominious comeuppance.

But Rebbe took the Gemara, and us, in a completely unexpected direction. Addressing his original question of what sets the Gadol apart, he explained that in life, each of us experiences flashes of high inspiration that, at least momentarily, raise us to a higher plane of perception and productivity. This can occur in any field, such as the case of the athlete who finds himself in the “zone” and simply can’t miss a shot, or the composer who hears an entire symphony playing in his head faster than he can transcribe the notes, or the scientist who, in a eureka moment, breaks through to a revolutionary discovery.

In the realm of Torah, which contains all wisdom and connects us to the Ribono shel Olam, this phenomenon can occur as well. At times we find we are learning at a higher, inspired level. Through toiling in Torah, we may merit a Siyata DiShmaya that opens our minds and souls to deeper and broader comprehension of the subject matter in particular and the totality of Torah in general. We find ourselves in a “spiritual zone” that fosters great strides in Torah study and deepens our connection to Hashem.

The longer we can maintain this special state, through continuous, sustained dedication to Limud Torah, coupled with performance of Mitzvos and Maasim Tovim, the more we can achieve. The common man often loses this inspiration, while the Gadol is able to maintain it and thus rise to ever greater levels of Chochmas HaTorah.

When Rava declared, “Hareni K’Ben Azai B’Shukei Tveryah,” he was alluding to the inspired state he experienced at that moment. He felt an acute communion with Hashem and His Torah.

Rebbe, with his breadth of knowledge and creativity of spirit, transformed the next bit of simple dialogue into breathtaking poetry. He noted that this heightened state of relationship with Hashem is referred to in Shir HaShirim as "Tapuach." "Ke'Tapuach B'Atzei HaYaar, Ken Dodi Bein HaBanim – Like the apple in the orchard, so is my Beloved..." (Shir HaShirim 2:3). Several additional pesukim in Shir Hashirim refer to Tapuchim as accompanying the deep love between Klal Yisroel and Hashem.

Rava, at that particular moment was, in effect, in a state of Tapuchin, profound connection with Hashem which could not be disturbed or encroached upon.

Furthermore, the word Eruvin in the context of Eruv Techumin and Eruv Chatzeiros has the connotation of "mixing" or mixing into as is the case of TaAroves Issur V'Heter.

When the student asked how one can be MeArev BeTapuchin, Rava, in his elevated state answered in the only way he could, "Ve'Chi MeArvin B'Tapuchin?!" Can one presume to "mix into" or encroach upon the sublime connection between God and man I am experiencing at this moment? That would be impossible, and there was nothing left for Rava to say at that time.

We students, privileged to study with our Rebbe, HaRav HaGaon Rav Chaim Belsky ZT"L believe we saw that state of "Tapuchin" manifest in Rebbe's relationship with Hashem, the Torah and all of Klal Yisrael. Rebbe truly was "K'Ben Azai B'Shukei Tveryah" driven like Ben Azai with a "Cheshkas HaTorah" that knew no bounds, coupled with a love for his Talmidim and for every single Jew.

Hashem has come down to His orchard and picked the finest Tapuach of all. May Rebbe serve as a Meilitz Yosher for his family and all of us before the Kisei HaKavod of his true Beloved.