

# M A C H B E R E S

INSIDE THE CHASSIDISHE AND YESHIVISH WORLD

Rabbi Gershon Tannenbaum

February 5, 2016

## **We've Lost Our Guiding Light** **Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, Zt"l (1938-2016)** ***Rosh Yeshiva Torah Vodaath***

The story of Rabbi Chaim Yisroel Belsky, Zt"l, who was *niftar* (passed away) on Thursday evening, 18<sup>th</sup> Shevat, January 28, 2016, began in the early 1890s. Rabbi Belsky was the greatly respected, leading *Posek* of the American yeshivish community. In addition to being the towering *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath, the mother of all American yeshivas, Rabbi Belsky was the halachic co-authority of the OU kosher certification.

Rabbi Belsky's maternal grandfather, Binyomin Wilhelm zt"l (1886-1972), arrived in the United States before the turn of the century, and in 1906, at the age of 20, had established a successful home furnishing business. Moving his family residence from the Lower East Side to the then upscale Williamsburg, he sought to provide his children with an authentic Jewish education without crossing them back over the East River.

In 1917, 99 years ago, he energetically led a dedicated group of parents in establishing Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. Towards the end of his life, Wilhelm moved to Israel where he established Mifal Torah Vodaath to promote Torah study among Sephardic youth. Heaven rewarded Binyamin Wilhelm with a grandson that was the *rosh yeshiva* of Torah Vodaath and a world Torah authority.

Almost all certified kosher foods throughout the world available today has one or more of its ingredients that is certified by the OU. The OU certifies more than 600,000 products internationally as kosher. Literally, since 1987, wherever kosher food is eaten, its certification most likely can be traced back to the OU and to Rabbi Belsky. Rabbi Belsky had an unmatched, uncanny understanding of every process and machine that is used in the manufacture of food, no matter how complex or complicated. He had an encyclopedic insight to every ingredient, its components, and its transformations. He knew from where it was derived, how it was transported, and how it interacted with other ingredients.

Rabbi Belsky was a young student of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath. He also studied at the feet of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, zt"l (1895-1886), revered author of *Igros Moshe*, and

later learned at Beis Medrash Elyon in Monsey.  
He earned *semicha* from Yeshiva Torah Vodaath in 1962.

Rabbi Belsky's breadth of knowledge was extraordinary. He was well known for his total recall of every *Tosfos* of every page in *Shas*, as well as his expertise in *Tanach*. He had an exceptional grasp of halacha, instantly citing the *Shulchan Aruch* and scores of other *sefarim*, word for word, from memory. Speaking at various gatherings, many open to spontaneous questions, Rabbi Belsky responded instantaneously with astounding clarity, no matter how difficult the question or how intricate the answer.

He served as a member of the Igud Horabbonim Beth Din successively under Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac Liebes, *zt"l* (1905-2000), Greidinger Rav and author of *Beis Avi*; Rabbi Baruch Leizerowski, *zt"l* (1910-2000) Chief Rabbi of Philadelphia and author of *Taam Baruch*; and *ybc"l* Rabbi Herschel Kurzrock, Igud Horabbonim Av Beth Din. Rabbi Belsky addressed many Igud events where he dealt with the aftermath of the 9-11 World Trade Center attack and freeing its widows from agunah status, New York City tap water, human hair wigs from India, surrogate motherhood, as well as the Monsey kashrus scandal.

Rabbi Belsky referred to the yearly New York City water bill which enumerates everything that is to be found in city water. The microscopic bugs that caused the hoopla were clearly listed every previous year and did not, according to Rabbi Belsky, rise to the level of prohibition. The Indian human wig brouhaha, too, did not constitute any halachic problem. During the front page splash of surrogate mothers for hire, Rabbi Belsky cited the halacha of a pregnant non-Jewish woman converting. Though she would lose all halachic connection to blood relatives, the child she carries would always be considered as her child. Rabbi Belsky clearly considered a surrogate mother, regardless of monetary remuneration or altruistic intentions, as the real mother.

Rabbi Belsky was greatly beloved by his students and by all who came to him for halachic queries or personal advice. As rav of Camp Agudah, he often taught his students about nature and astronomy. Whenever an unusual viewing of a star was possible, Rabbi Belsky, who had an astounding mastery of astronomy, would describe and explain the occurrence. In addition, when accompanied by a student or students in a walk through a forest, he would note trees and plants and elaborate on their attributes. As he understood astronomy and nature, so too he understood each individual student and addressed himself to each accordingly. Rabbi Belsky would literally play ball with his students, thus communicating with them on different levels.

In 2012, Rabbi Belsky suffered a serious medical emergency. At that time, together

with an outpouring of heartfelt recital of *Tehillim*, the name Chaim was added to his name and the entire yeshiva world prayed for Chaim Yisroel ben Chana Tzirel. Miraculously, he was healed and rehabilitated. Upon returning to teaching Torah at Torah Vodaath and serving all of world Jewry, he was feted at Torah Vodaath's Dinner in June of June, 2012.

In September of 2005, Rabbi Belsky served as the keynote speaker at the Igud Horabbonim Annual Siyum HaShas. The event also served as the Chag HaSmicha where 35 worthy student of Rabbi Belsky received their Certificates of Semicha. In 2013, in honor of Rabbi Belsky's more than 25 years of Harbotzas Torah, that year's Yeshiva Torah Vodaath Dinner honored the eminent *rosh yeshiva* and highlighted 50 young men who earned semicha from Rabbi Belsky. Among his contributions to Torah scholarship, Rabbi Belsky authored *Shulchan Halevi*, *Einei Yisroel*, and *Piskei Halachos*.

Tragically, the powerful beacon of Torah that we knew as Rabbi Belsky passed away. The entire world of Torah was immediately shrouded in sadness. The funeral took place in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath on Friday morning. Leading *rosh yeshivas* delivered heartbreaking *hespedim* (eulogies). Tens of thousands attended, filling the yeshiva's beis medrash, hallways, dining hall, auditorium, and surrounding streets. Video screens were stationed throughout. Sections were reserved for ladies, Kohanim, and elderly. In additions, the entire funeral was broadcast and streamed throughout the world. On *Motzaei Shabbos*, the *aron* (bier) was escorted by thousands to El Al at Kennedy Airport for interment in Israel.

Arriving in Jerusalem on Sunday, tens of thousands gathered at the Mir Yeshiva were tearful *hespedim* were given by leading *rosh yeshivas*. At the Kaminetz Yeshiva, additional *hespedim* broke hearts. Rabbi Belsky, the great *rosh yeshiva* and *posek*, was laid to rest on Har Menuchos. Remembering him is a blessing.