

RAV BELSKY'S DAF YOMI

by Rabbi Sholom Smith

One of the many *shiurim* that our *Rosh Yeshivah, Hagaon HaRav* Yisroel Belsky, *Zt"l*, gave in Torah Vodaath was his daily *Daf Yomi shiur*, which took place during the lunch-time break from 1:15 PM till *Mincha* at 1:50 PM. He gave this *shiur* for close to half a century and it was very precious and important to him. I had the *zechus* to be a part of the *shiur* for the past thirty-three years and would like to share some memories of and insights into the greatness of Rav Belsky.

The eighth *Siyum HaShas* of the *Daf Yomi* took place in November, 1982. It was the last *Siyum* attended by *Hagaon Harav* Yaakov Kamenetzky, *Zt"l*. In his keynote address, Reb Yaakov revealed that although he had completed *Shas* many times, this was the first time that he had done so with the cycle of the *Daf Yomi*. He even expressed the wish that, "If Hashem will grant me years I hope to complete the next cycle with *Tosafos*." (This was not to be as he passed away midway through the next cycle.)

Reb Yaakov added that he didn't see why *bnei Torah* and *kollel yungeleit* could not devote a half hour to an hour a day to learn the *Daf Yomi*. That would help them become familiar with the length and breadth of *Shas*, and not be limited to the *yeshiva mesechtos* commonly studied.

I remember thinking that this would be something worth considering, although I was amazed by the suggestion that the *Daf* could be covered in a half-hour a day! Nevertheless, two months into the next cycle, after the completion of *Mesechta Berachos*, I became a father for the first time. The *Kollel* had learned *Mesechta Shabbos* that previous year and so, to mark this great milestone in my life as well as to review what I had studied, I decided to join the *Daf Yomi* and began to attend Rav Belsky's daily lunchtime *shiur*.

Rav Belsky was then a young man in his mid 40's. His involvement in the myriad needs of *Klal Yisrael* that occupied so much of his time later in life had not yet begun. He had the time and *menuchas hanefesh* to prepare for this *shiur* and it was fascinating to see how much Torah knowledge could be compressed into those thirty minutes!

During the summer months, he served as Rav and *Manhig Ruchani* of Camp Agudah and the head of it's *Masmidim* program. The *Daf Yomi shiur* continued unabated every night at 10:00 P.M., camp time. There, in the rarefied atmosphere of the Catskill Mountains, and with no pressure to complete the *Daf* in thirty minutes, the *shiur* took on a broader and deeper format.

With the passing of the Torah giants of the previous generation, like Rav Moshe Feinstein, *Zt"l*, and Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, *Zt"l*, Rav Belsky assumed more and more responsibilities for the *Klal*, in addition to his main position as a *Rosh Yeshiva* in the Torah Vodaas *Beis Medrash*. Although he “barely had a minute to breathe,” as he often said, the lunch-time *Daf Yomi* was sacrosanct and it continued daily.

There was a small group of *talmidim*, myself included, who faithfully attended every day. Most of us spent either first or second *seder* learning the *Daf* before or after Rav Belsky’s *shiur*. It was truly amazing to observe how Rav Belsky skillfully navigated the great Sea of Talmud. It made no difference if it was the relatively familiar *mesechtos* of *Moed*, the more *lomdishe Yeshivishe mesechtos* of *Nashim* and *Nezikin*, or the difficult, intricate *mesechtos* of *Kodashim*. The Gemara was so fluent to Rav Belsky, as if he had just learned it.

He had the incomparable skill of being able to condense a lengthy *sugya* (which would normally entail a dozen *shiurim*) into one precise synopsis. The many Gemaras which required scientific knowledge of the cosmos and astronomy were clearly explained. When an unfamiliar Gemara word was reached, Rav Belsky often discussed the etymology of it. He showed us how many ancient Greek and Aramaic words were still in usage in the English language, albeit in slightly different format and pronunciation.

Dikduk was his specialty, and instead of quickly glossing over such Gemaras, he explained the rules in a simplified manner that made it understandable. He knew *Navi* verbatim – even the ones rarely studied, and if a *pasuk* from a *haftarah* was quoted, he sang the words with the *trop* (cantillations). He was an expert in history and brought to life the many stories told in *Shas* about the various *tana'im* and *amora'im* and explained the backdrop and the overall picture of that period.

There are many *Gemaras* that discuss ancient methods of agriculture, farm life and botany and we were thrilled to hear clear definitions of what tools were used, and how they worked. Rav Belsky constructed a number of models and drew detailed pictures on how these long-extinct tools functioned. It was remarkable to understand the evolution of crude hand utensils of fifteen centuries ago into the modern tools that we are all familiar with today.

Rav Belsky taught us that nothing in *Shas* was irrelevant. The techniques and methodology may have changed dramatically, but the *Chachmei HaTalmud* had not composed an antiquated Book. Everything *Shas* contained could be applied somehow to present-day living.

Rav Belsky was a master in understanding the many facets of the *Mishkan*, *Beis Hamidkash* and the various *korbanos* offered there. The *halachos* were on his fingertips, down

to the smallest details. How could a Jew believe that the arrival of *Moshiach* was imminent and not be prepared to supervise, teach (and, if he was a *Kohen*, perform) the Temple service?

He was a renowned expert in another sorely neglected part of Torah – *Seder Taharos*. The rules and guidelines of purity and impurity were on the tip of his tongue, although most are not in effect in our time. The complicated rules, as well as the many exceptions to the rules, were made much more understandable and easier to remember due to his crystal-clear explanations.

When the *Daf* reached the parts of *Mesechta Chullin* and elsewhere which discuss the anatomy of livestock and the various illnesses and fatal defects which would make an animal a *treifah* and unfit for consumption, he did not only explain the science of the topic. He would bring in his little black medical pouch containing his collection of razor-sharp scalpels and scissors and perform a dissection of a *ben pekua* (full-term fetus) baby calf on his classroom desk. He would remove his rabbinic frock, roll up his sleeves, don a plastic apron and disposable gloves and give us a “tour” of the anatomy of a kosher animal. He also showed us which parts of the *chelev* (forbidden fats) had to be *traibered* (removed) and how to *traiber* properly. These “shows” would take place once or twice a year, usually in coordination with his *Yoreh Deah Semicha shiur*. They would attract dozens of *talmidim* who stood by for an hour or longer in amazement at the incomparable, vast knowledge of Rav Belsky.

The many stories recorded in *Shas* presented fertile ground for Rav Belsky’s skills as a *darshan* (master orator). With a constant eye on the clock, he would relate snippets of some of his famous *drashos* and insights derived from the wisdom of the Sages. He spiced these insights with stories from his own life, and incidents about his own great *rabbeim* and the *rabbanim* he was close to. Counted among them were Rav Moshe, Rav Yaakov, Rav Reuven Grozovsky, Rav Gedalya Schorr, Rav Eliezer Silver, Rav Yaakov Teitelbaum (his predecessor as *Manhig Ruchani* at Camp Agudah), Rav Yisroel Chaim Kaplan (the *Mashgiach* of Beis Medrash Elyon) and, of course, his *Zaidah*, Reb Binyamin Wilhelm, the founder of Torah Vodaath.

When the Gemara discussed topics of food production and the like, he would share anecdotes of his decades-long experience in *kashrus* supervision, including his positions at the *Chof-K*, and for the past three decades at the OU.

He related how he had supervised the building of one of the first machine matzah bakeries in post-Communist Russia. When the Gemara dealt with wine production he would explain the intricacies of present-day wine-making and the problems and solutions to making it kosher.

The many Gemaros discussing the guidelines of *dinei Torah* and the court system brought out remarks on how to properly establish a *Beis Din* and how to avoid some of the major issues that plague this institution today.

For just about a third of a century I had the *zechus* to be part of Rav Belsky's *Daf Yomi shiur*. The memories abound and the sense of loss is so great. Who can replace such a person who knew so much, loved to teach, and will always serve as an inspiration of the heights a Jew can attain in the endless pursuit of Torah knowledge.