

Rabbi Belsky Remembered

February 2, 2016

I was not a talmid of Rabbi Belsky in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath or in Camp Agudah as I did not attend either. My association with Rabbi Belsky was in the OU where I had the great zechus of interacting with him on kashruth matters, so my recollections of him are mostly anecdotal.

Rabbi Yisroel Belsky was the senior halachic consultant for the OU where he served in that capacity for over twenty years along with ybl"ch Rabbi Herschel Schachter and Rabbi Menachem Genack. Rabbi Belsky was also the rosh hayeshiva of Yeshiva Torah Vodaath as well as the director of Torah programming in Camp Agudah for decades. He was 77 years old and received his smicha from both Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l.

Rabbi Belsky was renowned for his brilliant mind that mastered so many facets of Torah as it did a myriad of other pursuits. The common denominator is that he made sure it all related to Torah or simply put, his Torah driven mind that brought him to be inquisitive about all of Hashem's Creation.

His solid grasp of mathematical equations allowed him to compute in his mind some of the complex formulas necessary in kashruth computations. As mentioned by Rabbi Genack at the levaya he was able to calculate whether an oil tanker that hauled non-kosher one day and then the next day, after a non kosherizing cleaning, hauled kosher material, held enough kosher liquid to outnumber by a ratio of 60:1 the metal cylindrical wall of the tanker.

His interests were vast. He was an accomplished mohel, a shochet and owing to his mastery of anatomy was an expert menaker, deveiner of animals from non-permissible blood vessels; prohibited sinews (gid hanashe); and prohibited fats. He exhibited his surgical skills when he taught countless students in camp and in OU sponsored training programs how to dissect an animal properly.

He had an amazing knowledge of astronomy which he used to explain some of the most difficult and arcane issues in the celestial bodies as mandated by Chazal in their discussion of Kiddush Hachodesh and other related issues.

Rabbi Elya Brudny of the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn offered an insightful comment during his hesped of Rav Belsky. "If not for the fact that Rav Belsky wore so many different hats, he would have been more renowned as a posek (halachic decisor). He meant to say that since Rav Belsky was known in so many different fields, his mastery of Halacha may have gone underappreciated.

Rabbi Belsky brooked no tolerance for "Halacha by tumult". He simply could not stand when people with insufficient knowledge of the facts or Halacha made a tempest in a teapot about important halachic matters. "If not for Rav Belsky, none of us here would be eating fish!" proclaimed Rabbi Genack at the levaya. How true. There were those who were excited to promote the idea that perhaps most fish we eat are not kosher due to worm infestation. This tumult began to take a life of its own until Rabbi Belsky was able to disarm them by exposing the real facts in the matter.

Rabbi Belsky also went against the stream, so to speak, when it came to the copepods in water crisis. Rabbi Belsky would come to the OU on a weekly basis. He very often looked exhausted due to the fact that he never had a moment's rest. The phone constantly rang in his home, or wherever people could figure out where he was as they sought his advice in Torah disputes, Halacha and shalom bayis. A system had to be developed to hold all his outside calls when he came to the OU so that he could devote his time to kashruth matters exclusively.

I once went with him to visit a major jam and peanut producer in Fredonia, NY outside of Buffalo. The issues were very complex as there was non-kosher production in the same plant. It took a lot to figure out how to kasher the cooking kettles, the pistons in the packer and the cooling tunnel. The company realized when speaking with Rabbi Belsky that they were not just talking to "some rabbi from Brooklyn" but to someone who likely understood the system of production as well as their engineers. It made gaining their complete cooperation that much easier.

Relating to other kashruth matters he once told me that although we must strictly adhere to every rule of kashruth Halacha, we must also be sure that what we do conforms to common sense. This is a principle that he applied on a regular basis.

He was also a kind and caring person, despite his imposing presence. There is a woman in the OU named Elaine that works in the mail room. Elaine updates me regularly on what is happening in the OU office. When Rabbi Belsky was ill in the hospital, Elaine wrote to me that she visited him, twice, and he managed to lift his hand and wave to her with a forced smile. I remarked to Elaine that I was not aware that she felt close enough with Rabbi Belsky that she visited him when almost no one outside the family did. She told me that she just had to because whenever Rabbi Belsky would see her in the office he made sure to greet her warmly. He really was a special person.

On a lighter note, I used to have the honor of making copies of the NY Times crossword puzzle for Rabbi Belsky and hand it to him before he sat down to his lunch which usually consisted of a slice of rye bread and a can of sardines. Somehow between bites, in the space of a half hour he would complete the puzzle (on Thursdays when he came the Times puzzle is super tough) and place it in my mail box. I asked him what was the secret to being able to do the puzzle, and so quickly, and he answered with look of straightforwardness "you have to train your mind to think as krum (crooked) as the puzzler!"

In a conversation with Rabbi Genack following Rabbi Belsky's petira , he told me " Rabbi Belsky is truly irreplaceable". Unfortunately, that is the sad truth. Yehi zichron baruch.

by Rabbi Yoel Schonfeld