

RAV SHLOMO HALBERSTAM OF BOBOV, ZTZ"Z

1947: Into the gloom of postwar New York — a community of survivors reeling from their losses, numb, uncertain, grieving — came a soul aflame. He melted their doubts with warmth and healed their wounds with love. He too had lost so much: a wife, children, community ... yet he was single-minded, focused on the people and their needs: jobs, shidduchim, housing.

1997: He sits at the head of the *tisch*, surrounded by a wall of devoted chassidim rising to meet the sky, families equaling, perhaps surpassing, the Bobov of his youth.

The Rebbe.

Majestic, regal, glowing.

Not only what he built, but who he was. Serene, soft, tender, yet clear and deliberate in his goals for them, for their families. His language touched them all: not only that first group

of war-torn survivors, but even a new generation, the young chassidim, born and nurtured on American soil, were inspired by his bearing, his conduct, his message.

In honor of his yahrtzeit on Rosh Chodesh Av, *Mishpacha's* Yisroel Besser sits with two of the Rebbe's close family members: Rav Benzion Twerski, Rav of Beth Jehudah in Milwaukee, and Rav Chaskel Shia Tauber, Rav of Montreal's Bobover kehillah



Photos: kol haolam kulo, gedolimpics

VISIONS IN THE NIGHT

by Yisroel Besser

The old maxim puts the word value of a picture at a thousand. This picture is worth far more. It speaks sentences, words that eddy into chapters that vortex into volumes telling his story. Those volumes are the people that he built, raised, and established. The picture says it all.

The picture is from Succos, and he is holding — no, grasping — his *daled minim*, in a firm, proud grip, as he waves them aloft. Its symbolism is obvious. The Rebbe, holding on tightly to his Four Species, which Chazal teach us represent the full spectrum of our people. The Rebbe, embracing the Jewish nation in its entirety, the embrace of a mother to her child.

But even without the symbolism, the picture is a powerful one. “He sat like that for the duration of Hallel,” recalls Reb Benzion, “his arms outstretched, holding his *daled minim* aloft with strength he did not have. The look of concentrated ecstasy never left his face, as he taught all of us, thousands of Yidden, what *simchah shel mitzvah* really means.”

Reb Benzion was a “*ben bayis*” by the Rebbe. His grandmother, Rebbetzin Devorah Leah Twerski of Milwaukee, was the Rebbe’s sister, and as such, he merited a special closeness with his great-

uncle, the Rebbe. For the duration of four years, he ate the Shabbos meals with him, learned with him, observed him from up close in a way few others were able to. “And the feeling that I most associate with those years was the tangible joy he managed to impart, the great privilege that he made us feel in being *ovdei Hashem*.”

“Even today, when I enter my own succah, I visualize his beaming countenance as he strode into the succah, singing Shalom Aleichem. When I light Chanukah *lecht* or lean to the side to drink the four cups at the Seder, his voice is always in the background, the joy that emanated from him brightening my room. That was his legacy.”

Simchah Shel Mitzvah Reb Benzion opens our conversation with a Pesach Seder memory. “It was the last year of his life, and he was already frail and weak, ravaged by disease, when they wheeled him in to the Pesach Seder. The family was anxious about the Rebbe’s mood, for this Seder was not like all the other years. Traditionally, the Seder had been held in a grandiose fashion, with thousands of participants basking in the Rebbe’s glow. He would lead them in the Haggadah and *mitzvos haleilah*, expressing the gratitude that they all felt in his unique way. It was true *malchus*. That last year, everything was different. The Rebbe was being nourished through a feeding

tube, obviously unable to eat matzoh or drink the four *kosos*, and the family knew that he would be broken. Thus, they set up a small Seder in his home, and they joined him, filled with trepidation as to how he would react.

“The Rebbe looked up from his wheelchair, and surveyed the Seder table, looking around at the anxious faces of his children. ‘*Kinderlach, kinderlach*,’ he said, ‘*hehr tzu* [listen well]. I can no longer drink the *daled kosos*, and I can longer eat the *heilege matzos* ... but, *kinderlach*,’ his voice gathered strength, ‘*ich dank der Eibershter* [I thank Hashem] that he allowed me another year in which I can be *mekayem* the wonderful mitzvah of *sippur yetziyas mitzrayim*. *Kinderlach*, let us begin the Seder.’ ”

As I sit there, enthralled by this tale, astounding in its simplicity, of what true *simchah shel mitzvah* means, I am privileged to hear another. Rav Yechezkel Shia Tauber was the Rav’s beloved grandson, and he spent the night at his grandparents’ home on many occasions.

“It was shortly before the Yom Tov of Shavuot and I was sleeping by the Zeideh’s home. That Shavuot, there was going to be a *hachmassas sefer Torah* in the *beis medrash*. They had brought the brand new Torah scroll to the Rebbe’s home in advance of the ceremony, and his excitement was visible. He had a way of letting



The Bover Rebbe with the Vizhnitzer Rebbe of Bnei Brak

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— Rav Yechezkel Shia Tauber

me know that he wanted me to go to sleep, that there were roads that he wanted to travel in solitude.

“He suggested that I looked tired, so I took the hint. I bade him good night and retired to my bedroom, a room that bordered on the room where the *sefer Torah* was resting. I couldn’t fall asleep, and it was late at night, the house completely silent, and I heard movement from the room. I tiptoed from my bed and peeked in.

“There I saw the Zeideh, the aged Rebbe, clutching the *sefer Torah* close to his heart, and dancing a lone dance. He was completely enraptured, circling the table enveloped in a holy fire of joy. He danced this way and that way, suddenly catching sight of me as he rounded the table.

“He didn’t hesitate. ‘Chaskel Shia,’ he said, ‘do me a favor and help me out. As you know, we will be having a big *hachmassas sefer Torah* and I will have to dance with the Torah. I am already old, and worried that it might be too heavy for me, so I am just testing out if I can hold it or not. Now you take it, and tell me what you think.’”

The stories keep on coming. “I believe that was the secret of his longevity. His youthfulness and freshness in every mitzvah kept him so alive, so vibrant,” comments Reb Benzion.

“The Rebbe once had to undergo surgery for a hernia operation and the doctor assured him that everything would go smoothly. ‘I have done this procedure so many times that I can do it with my eyes closed!’ he told the Rebbe. ‘I don’t understand,’ the Rebbe remarked to the family member accompanying him, ‘I am already an old man, and have been putting

perfection. I was once preparing his bag for the *mikveh*, and I folded his towel in a sloppy manner. He immediately protested, ‘Is that how one folds a towel for the *mikveh*?’”

Yet, they recall, in the crush and pressure of the *tisch*, it was almost inevitable that one of the *gabbaim* would accidentally spill on him, and there would be drops of soup or compote on his *bekeshe*. He would never flinch when that happened, but as soon as the *tisch* was over, he would hurry to his room to change into fresh clothing.

Another memory: “There was once an event in the Bover *beis medrash*, and a fellow, not a chassid, rose to speak. In the middle of his address, his pants began to slide down, and as his listeners watched in horrified amusement, they fell down altogether. There were few in the room who could refrain from smirking at the sight, but



The Bover Rebbe visiting Camp Shalva, the Bover boys' camp in the Catskills

on tefillin each day for over sixty years, yet I can’t do it with my eyes closed.”

Cheshbon Hanefesh I listen in silence as my two interviewees, both of whom were intimates of this great man, conjecture as to what his secret was. “It was the way he lived with a constant *cheshbon hanefesh*, an awareness of what was expected of him, and as such, he was always filled with serenity.

“His self control was not less than that of the *baalei mussar*. His diet consisted of the exact same foods each day, never varying. He would never eat his supper, regardless of the late hour, until he had learned a certain amount. Yet, despite the rigors of his relentless schedule, he was never anything other than completely joyous.”

Reb Benzion recalls: “The Rebbe was extremely neat, always impeccable in his appearance. We knew how much cleanliness meant to him.” Reb Chaskel Shia concurs. “He did everything deliberately, demanding

the Rebbe sat there impassively. He turned to his son-in-law and commented quietly, ‘It’s difficult to smile when you see a *kivshan ha’esh* [the blazing furnace destined for one who humiliates another Jew] in front of you.’”

Reb Benzion shares a precious recollection. “On Shabbos morning, the Rebbe would come up to the house, and while we waited for the Rebbetzin to put her finishing touches on the *seudah*, we would learn, usually the *sefer Zera Kodesh* from Reb Naftali Ropshitzer.

“One week, the Rebbe came upstairs, completely exhausted from a long davening, and it was clear that he was anxious to start the *seudah*. We were unable to begin, however, because one of the family members who would be joining us for the *seudah* had not yet arrived. We waited for quite a while. That week, instead of learning *Zera Kodesh*, the Rebbe suggested we learn something else; we learned the explanation

of the *Zohar HaKadosh* on the *pasuk* of *lo siva’aru eish b’chol moshvoseichem b’yom haShabbos*, the injunction against lighting a fire on Shabbos. The *Zohar* learns this as a prohibition against getting angry on Shabbos.”

Reb Benzion begins to hum a *nigun*, one that is haunting, at once heartrending and hopeful. “When the Rebbe would prepare to don his tallis, on Erev Shabbos before Minchah, this is the *nigun* he would sing. He once explained that the seforim refer to those final moments of the week as a time for *teshuvah*, and he would actively engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, reviewing the preceding week during that time. As the notes would rise heavenward, tears would fall from his eyes.”

Sensitivity It was that self-awareness that made him so very aware of the needs of others. Though for himself, he needed little by way of *kavod*, he understood that respect can be an elixir of life to others. He once returned from a *Rebbishe chasunah* late at night, and smiled with satisfaction. “Ah, a *Rebbishe chasunah!*” he exulted. He explained to Reb Chaskel Shia that there had been several rabbinic dignitaries in attendance and there was opportunity to bestow *kavod* upon others throughout the night, a cause for rejoicing.

Reb Chaskel Shia recalls a Shabbos meal that he ate at his *zeideh’s* table, when they were joined by some cousins who did not follow a chassidic lifestyle. During the meal, the Rebbe told his young grandchildren a humorous story that had occurred at the *tisch* of his father, the Kedushas Tzion. The Rav that was honored to lead *bentsching* had been dozing, so when he heard his name called he awoke with a start. He reached out and seized the *mayim acharonim* cup, lifting it high, and calling out, “*Rabboisai, wir velen bentschen.*” As people laughed aloud at the mistake, the Kedushas Tzion reached out and grabbed his son, Reb Shloime’le, by the hand, squeezing it tightly. “I understood that he was giving me *mussar*, warning me not to laugh at the shame of another Yid,” said the Rebbe, completing the story.

“And we understood as well,” says Reb Chaskel Shia. “He was about to honor our cousins with *bentsching*, and he knew that, as *chassidishe* children, we might laugh at the unfamiliar accent. We heard the warning loud and clear!”

Reb Benzion recounts how the Rebbe once came to Milwaukee to visit his sister, Rebbetzin Twerski. “It was a day that the community will never forget, the day we

He saw a world in its devastation and presided over its renaissance, teaching the new generation the lessons that had sustained the old

welcomed a *melech Yisrael* to our town. The Rebbe ate lunch at our home during that trip.

“The next day, I was in my office at the shul, and the phone rang. I lifted it to hear the unmistakable voice of my great-uncle. ‘Can I please speak with Rabbi Benzion Twerski?’ he asked in English. ‘Feter, it’s me,’ I replied.

“‘Listen well. Yesterday your Rebbetzin prepared a lunch that was *k’sseudas Shlomo b’shaito*, and I so enjoyed it. I don’t think that I had the opportunity to tell her just how delicious everything was, so please tell her in my name that the meal was perfect, it had *aleh taanim.*’”

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He saw a world in its devastation and presided over its renaissance, teaching the new generation the lessons that had sustained the old. “He never forgot where he came from, never accepted the American way,” recalls Reb Chaskel Shia. “Someone once said something that he disagreed with, and he argued vehemently. ‘How can you express an opinion? It must be because you grew up here, in the land of Coca-Cola! How can you understand the way things ought to be?’”

He strove to create a Bobov that would match the Bobov that had been destroyed, working assiduously to build chassidim that his father would have been proud of. He once jokingly commented that “I strive to preserve my father’s *minhagim*, but I do have one tradition that I haven’t received from my father: my father never owed millions of dollars for his *mosdos.*”

Reb Benzion tells how the Rebbe was once discussing the proper way to grow, to develop as an *ehrlische Yid*. He told Reb Benzion that it is extremely important to make small *kabbalos*, not to strive for things beyond one’s abilities. “When I was running from the Nazis, *ym”s*, and my life was constantly in danger, I made two simple *kabbalos*, ones that I felt were within reach for me. One was never to eat meat again. The other was a commitment that, although my father didn’t lead a public Melaveh Malkah, I would.”

Reb Benzion heard the Rebbe’s point, but in that very story, he heard something totally different, something that tells us much about the attitude of this great man.

“I thought to myself, *Ribono shel Olam,*



Learning in solitude



During one of his visits to Israel



A morning in Elul

here is a young man, watching his world go up in smoke, never more than just a few footsteps ahead of his pursuers, struggling to get through each day, and he is thinking about the Melaveh Malkah *seudos* that will yet be.”

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Is that it? Is that what makes the picture so particular? The frail arms extended, holding the *daled minim*, affirmations of victory, a display of triumph, a note of thanks ... for the dreams of a cold, lonely night hiding in a bunker that have been realized. ■