

# A Talmid Recalls His Rebbe

An Adaptation of a *Hesped*  
Delivered at the *Leraya* of  
Rabbi Dovid Lifshitz, זצ"ל



Rabbi Lifshitz at the recent *Siyumi Hoshana* celebration in Madison Square

## THE VAST GULF OF SEPARATION

I feel totally inadequate to define or adequately describe the greatness of *Mori VeRabbi Hagaon Reb Dovid Lifshitz*, זצ"ל. I can only give some impressions of a *talmid* and relate some personal experiences.

I learned in his *shiur* for one year, yet I gained from him a *derech* (approach) in learning for my whole life, and I remained, as did many, a *talmid* my entire life.

One very strong feeling I have with the *Rebbe's* passing is the quite palpable manifestation of *ידוד הדורות*—"the descent of the generations"—as each successive generation falls short of the Torah greatness of the previous generation.

The *Chachamim* tell us: "If the previous generations were angels, then we are men. If the previous generations were men, then we are like donkeys, and not like the donkey of Reb Chanina ben Dosa or Reb Pinchos ben Yair, but like ordinary donkeys" (*Shabbos* 112b).

The *Chachamim* were referring to the generations immediately preceding them. They felt that the gulf in the breadth and depth of the grasp of To-

rah between the generations was like the one that separates angels and men, or men and donkeys. This is not just a quantum leap, but the difference between two worlds, inhabitants of one unable to understand the other. A man cannot understand a *malach*; a donkey cannot understand a man. They are in different worlds. It is as if a tiny ant comes into contact with a man. He thinks to himself in his ant mind, "What a great creature is this I have come upon!" He's looking at what to him seems to be a huge black object—the man's shoe. He knows nothing of the foot, which fits into the shoe, nothing of the man's knee, and surely nothing of what goes on within his heart or his brain. For the ant, the shoe is the man.

This is as much as we comprehend of the Torah greatness of the previous generations. They lived in different worlds, even though we may have co-existed with them in this world.

The *Rebbe's* command of Torah was really beyond the comprehension of his *talmidim*. No matter where in *Shas* one spoke to him, he could discuss the *sugya* in depth, directly quoting the language of the *Gemora*, and with full command of the *shitos* of the *Rishonim* and *Gedolei Acharonim* (views of the earlier and later commentaries). And he himself was aware of the gulf between himself and his *Rabbei'im*, and spoke of it to his *talmidim*.

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As long as he lived, his *Rebbe*, Reb Shimon Shkop, lived. He always referred to him as "*Mori VeRabbi, Reb Shimon*." I remember once asking him to explain a *s'vora* (reasoning) of Reb Shimon in a difficult *sugya* in *Nedorim*. (He was not learning *Nedorim* at the time.) He said, "This is what *Mori VeRabbi Reb Shimon* said," and then proceeded to repeat in Yiddish the words he had heard from Reb Shimon several decades before. When I continued to probe, he repeated the exact same words.

**Rabbi Keller**, *Rosh Hayeshiva* of Telshe-Chicago, is a frequent contributor to *The Jewish Observer*, most recently with "Family Values: A Torah Perspective," May '93. The *hesped* (eulogy) on which this tribute is based was delivered at Rabbi Lifshitz's funeral at Yeshivas Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan, where Rabbi Keller was his *talmid*.

## HIS APPROACH TO THE TALMUD

His *derech* in learning was to infer the precise meaning of the *Rishonim's* intent from their words, specifically pointing out differences in *halacha* between various *Rishonim* which could be understood from seemingly slight differences in nuance in their words.

At times he would build an entire *shiur* on a *diyuk* (inference) in the language of a *Rashba* or a *Ritva*. It was not his way to approach a *sugya* with a *s'vora* that pleased him and then try to demonstrate how this or that *Rishon* held the *s'vora*. He began with the goal of understanding what the *Rishonim* said.

His *hasmoda* (diligence) and "*ligen in lernen*" (total immersion in his studies) as a *bachur* in Grodna and in Mir were legendary. Even in his later years, he would never lie down during the day. Once when he was sick and was forced to rest, he told the *Rebbetzin* not to say that he was in bed... "*Es iz a bizayon*. It's something to be ashamed of."

He would tell us of winter Friday nights in Mir, when it would get dark very early. After davening, the *bachurim* would eat a quick *seuda* and then return to the *beis midrash* to remain studying until the early hours of the morning. In the middle of the night, they would take a break to eat *kugel*. His purpose in telling us this was to give us the flavor of the European *yeshivos* and an idea of how *bachurim* developed into the *Gedolei Torah* that those *yeshivos* produced.

His world was the world of *ד אמת של הלכה*—"the four cubits of *halacha*." His mind was always engrossed in Torah. Yet that did not isolate him from the world. His love for Torah did not conflict with his love and concern for *Klal Yisroel*, and for each individual Jew. His manifold *chessed* and *Klal* activities never took him out of the *daled amos* of *halacha*. He took the *daled amos* of *halacha* with him wherever he went. And he tried to influence his *talmidim* to do the same.

In a *shmuess* he said once at the end of a year, he spoke of those four *amos* and in a characteristic insight, bridging the worlds of *halacha* and *aggada*, applied to them the *halacha*:

that a person acquires as his possession that which is within his four *amos*. He told his *talmidim*, "A *ben Torah* never leaves the *yeshiva*. If he does, it is a sign that he never was in the *yeshiva*. For wherever he goes, his four *amos* should take possession—should be *medakesh* (sanctify)—that which surrounds him, and transform it into a *yeshiva*."

## HIS GREAT LOVE FOR HIS TALMIDIM

He had a great love and affection for his *talmidim*. I'll never forget the day I went to take leave of the *Rebbe*, before I left New York to go to *Telshe Yeshiva* in Cleveland. We were standing in the *beis midrash*. He took me by the arm and drew me out into the hall. I didn't understand at the moment why he was taking me out of the *beis midrash*. But then he gave me a kiss on the cheek (one is not permitted to kiss one's child in the *beis midrash*) and

\*See R' MA. ORACH CHAIM 98:1

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told me to make sure that I write down any *chiddushim* in Torah that I might come up with in the course of my learning. Unfortunately, I cannot say that I followed the *Rebbe's* admonition, but I can still feel that kiss on my cheek.

Once, when he was in Chicago on a mission, he came to my home for a visit, unannounced. We were in the midst of preparations for a daughter's wedding, and invitations were all over the dining room table. He went to the table and took one, saying, "I now have my invitation. You don't have to send me one." Then he really caught me off guard: "I'm on my

way to New York. Maybe I can take a package for you?"

I was taken aback and protested that I would never think of bothering the *Rebbe*. But he insisted, and if I remember correctly, ended up taking a package to New York!

Just as he would share in his *talmidim's simchas* as if they were his own, he would share in their grief and misfortune. He would shed tears. And he would shed real tears, if he heard that a *talmid* had not acted as he should have. He would try to be *melamed zechus* (find some justification) for the person.

Yet he was far from naive. His great love for Torah and his love for his *talmidim* did not blind him to the dangers and temptations of the society in which he and they lived. He spoke out continuously against those dangers and temptations, and against the falsification of Torah by movements far removed from the *daled amos* of *halacha*, and philosophies purporting to be part of the *daled amos* of *halacha*.

#### HIS PASSING

He passed away the week of *Parshas Chukas*. That *Parsha* (*Bamidbar* 21:17,18) tells us of the *שירת הנחל*—the song that the people of Israel sang over the miraculous source of water, which had originally come to them in the *zechus* of *Miriam*. The *Ohr HaChayim* explains that this song was actually the song of Torah, which is also referred to as "a well of water."

באר חפרה שרים כזה מימי העם במחוקק — במשענמים — "This is the well that was dug by the princes. The nobles of our people hollowed it out, Carved out with their staffs."

"This is the well that was dug by the princes"—these were the *Avos*, *Avrohom*, *Yitzchok* and *Yaakov*, who prepared this heavenly source of water, the Torah, to be given to *Yisroel*. However, the well was not yet ready to be drunk from until *במה ימי העם*, "The nobles of our people hollowed it out." This refers to *Moshe*, who brought the Torah down into this world, those who received it from him, the *Zekeinim* and *Neviim* (elders and prophets), and the *Anshei Knesses Hagedola* who explained it and revealed its hidden parts, for *Torah Sheb'Ksav*—the Written Torah—cannot be imbibed without *Torah Sheb'al Peh*.

Says the *Ohr Hachayim*, this refers to that which the sages of later generations would be *mechadeish* (reveal new meanings in Torah).

ואין זה אלא כחוקק בה חקיקה ואינה כמדת הראשונים שחפרו וכרו וגם זה אינו אלא במשענמים של ראשונים שכל דקדוק ודקדוק שידקדק בתורה צריך לפרשו ע"פ דבוריהם וכל דבר שלא היה מיוסד ע"פ דברי הקדמונים אין לסמוך עליו

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**H**is love for Torah did not conflict with his love and concern for *Klal Yisroel* as a whole, and for each individual Jew. His manifold *chessed* and *Klal* activities never took him out of the *daled amos* of *halacha*. He took the *daled amos* of *halacha* with him wherever he went. And he tried to influence his *talmidim* to do the same.

this well of Torah, can only be undertaken with the staffs of the *Rishonim*—the earlier sages.

"For each inference exacted from Torah must be explained according to their (the earlier sages') words, and anything not founded on the words of the *Kadmonim* (earlier authorities) cannot be relied upon."

I believe that the words of the *Ohr HaChayim* perfectly characterize the *Rebbe's* approach to Torah. He did not seek to create a new *mesora*—a new "Tradition." All of his learning and his *shiurim* reflected an awesome respect for the words of the *Rishonim*, and this is what he tried to imbue in his *talmidim*.

This is what he taught us. He did not approach the *Rashba* with a *chiddush* of his own—a preconceived notion of what he wanted the *Rashba* to say. He wanted to

know: What does the *Rashba* say?

#### HIS FLIGHT TO FREEDOM

**A**lthough this is not a biography, I feel that I must include a story that he personally related to me in great detail—the story of his flight from Suwalk.

*After the German occupation forces entered Suwalk, he remained behind because he felt that as Rav he should stay until the very end to guide his Kehilla. But word reached him that the Germans were about to arrest him, and he should leave immediately. He, the Rebbetzin and other family members took a wagon at night to flee for the border. In the middle of the night, they reached a crossroad, not knowing which way to turn. A Polish peasant came by and called out, "Suwalker Rav! Don't go that way! Go the other way!" They followed these direc-*

*tions and escaped to safety. They later found out that had they gone the other way, they would have fallen right into the hands of the waiting Germans.*

In relating this incident, he stressed the total improbability of a Polish peasant riding down a country road in the middle of the night during wartime. Then, lowering his eyes, he said, "*Ich shem zich tzu zogen, az dos iz geven Eliyahu HaNavi—I'm ashamed to say that I believe that it was Eliyahu HaNavi.*"

#### TAKING LEAVE, FROM WITHIN THE DALED AMOS.

**W**henver one visited him, the talk was always in Torah—not in a superficial manner, but in depth. Even in his last months, when his sickness precluded his "talking in learning," he would speak words of *beracha* and *chizuk* in learning.

The last time I visited him, he was very weak. He spoke to me as if I were still one of the young *talmidim* learning in his *shiur*. "*Ir zolt zeh'n tzu ligen in lernen un shteigen in lernen un veren a gadol baTorah.*"

This was his life and this was his legacy: Be immersed in learning, grow in learning, become *Gedolei Torah*.

When all else of the world was out of his sight, even when his prodigious memory had failed him, he never left the *daled amos shel halacha*.

■ וְיָדוּ אֶת בְּרַךְ הַתּוֹרָה מִשְׁנֵי עֲזָרָה בְּעֶזְרַת הַחַיִּים

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