

“My Rebbe’s Rebbe”

I arrived at the Yeshiva in September of 1992 and I just watched him from the distance. The elderly, distinguished looking Rosh Yeshiva, with full beard and traditional garb, was frail and always had someone accompanying him as he walked ever so slowly. I yearned to approach and introduce myself, but fear held me back. I watched him on his last Yomim Noraim as he struggled to stand through the davening and I continued to watch him whenever I merited a glimpse of him on campus. This great man was Rav Dovid Lifshitz zt'l, "Suvalker Rav", President of Ezras Torah and Rosh Yeshiva at the [Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary \(RIETS\)](#) for almost fifty years.

If we never spoke a word, then why was I so intrigued by Rav Dovid? The answer to this query is revealed by identifying my first meaningful “Rebbe/Talmid relationship.” I spent my summer after graduating high school as a counselor for 7th grade boys. These boys remarkably had a Rebbe that profoundly impacted their lives and who came to visit them in summer camp. My campers discovered that their beloved Rebbe and their beloved counselor would be learning in the same Israeli institution the following year and decided to orchestrate a “shidduch or **chavrusa shaf.**” When I arrived in Israel I was assigned an older chavrusa named Rav Ari Waxman. Every night for two hours, I would learn meseches sanhedrin with Rav Ari in his home while enjoying his wife’s deliciously baked delicacies. There is little doubt that I was the envy of most of my classmates that year for having such a desirable night seder-“be-geshem ube-ruach.”

Rav Ari Waxman became my first “Rebbe.” We spoke out many concepts in hashkafa, including shidduchim, living in Eretz Yisrael, career, serving in the army, yeshiva world versus dati leumi world and many other fascinating topics. I literally became a “ben bayis” and became the very first of what would soon be multitudes of other profoundly impacted American boys under his tutelage arriving from modern orthodox homes.

At some point, I noticed the distinguished picture on his wall. I discovered that his maternal grandfather was Rav Dovid Lifshitz. I didn’t know at the time the magnitude or significance of the man on the wall, but I eventually begin to intuit and feel how important Rav Dovid was in Rav Ari’s life. When Rav Ari attended RIETS he actually lived with his grandparents in their apartment rather than living in the dormitory. He attended his grandfather’s shiur and accompanied him in many different contexts.

Towards the end of my second year in yeshiva in Israel, Rav Waxman and his wife were blessed with triplets as their first children. Two of them were boys and Rav Ari had to prepare a shtikel torah for the brisim. Parenthetically, that baby girl most recently had her first child transforming the Waxman’s into grandparents themselves. We together studied and prepared a piece related to milah and priah from the published shiurim of his grandfather. It was the apex and culmination of our learning relationship and I felt welcomed into his personal intimate relationship with his revered Zeide.

Rav Dovid Lifshitz died on the 9th day of Tammuz in 1993, 20 years ago and a year after the birth of those triplets. Although we never spoke, I do have one of his personal seforim in my library as a memento of sorts. However, my connection to my namesake was far from over and was really just beginning. Rav Dovid would continue to play a major role in my life for many years to come.

In 1995, I was assigned a Rabbinic internship that ended up being a five year stint that catapulted me toward the Rabbinate and ultimately away from the legal profession. My assigned mentor was Rabbi Benjamin Yudin of Fair Lawn, NJ. I spent 5 consecutive years of my life, including almost every Shabbos in the Yudin home. I followed Rabbi Yudin around everywhere and learned from one of the “masters” how to become an effective and impactful pulpit Rabbi. I saw some incredible things and it was truly the experience of a life-time. Rabbi Yudin imparted to me the importance of having a “Rebbe” and imbibing Torah from every corner. He would regularly converse in learning with Rav Elyah Swirdloff of Patterson, NJ, Rav Aharon Kreiser z’l of Lakewood as well as with Rav Herschel Schechter and Rav Mordechai Willig of RIETS. Interestingly, his prime Rebbe in his formative yeshiva years was none other than Rav Dovid Lifshitz zt’l.

There is one anecdote about Rav Dovid that I heard from Rabbi Yudin that stands out in my mind. At the bris of one of the Yudin boys, Rav Dovid was of course present. After the mila, Rav Dovid took a B-line directly toward Rebetzin Yudin to testify how everything went smoothly and that the baby was ok. This chesed and sensitivity, Rabbi Yudin inculcated into his own Rabbanus and it is something that I do as well in my kehilla. I had felt Rav Dovid’s historic warmth that he clearly imparted to Rabbi Yudin, but this was a precious practical nugget that I as a “grand-talmid” could latch onto as well.

In 2000, I began a stint of 4 years practicing corporate law in some of Manhattan’s biggest firms. For the first time in over a decade, I was completely beyond the walls of the beis medrash. I needed badly to be connected to something that would be mechazek me and keep me spiritually sound until I was able to return to more full-time learning. Towards the end of my time in Fair Lawn, Rav Moshe Weinberger of Aish Kodesh, Woodmere, NY was a guest lecturer in the shul. I had the opportunity to drive him from Woodmere to Fair Lawn and back and I was also the beneficiary of massive traffic so I spent about three private hours with the Rebbe that evening. At that point Rav Weinberger was already a spiritual juggernaut who was difficult for an “outsider” to get a hold of. We connected in a profound way and there are still Torah’s that I often say over from that conversation. He also spoke to me about his Rebbe-Rav Dovid Lifshitz zt’l.

I recall Rav Weinberger speaking of Rav Dovid longingly, with a yearning and an ache that was palpable. He shared that he was once driving Rav Dovid somewhere and he shared a vort with him. Rav Dovid was so enthused by what he heard that he required Rav Weinberger to stop the car and say it over to him while they stood still on the side of the road. After hearing the vort again, Rav Dovid proclaimed in a most definitive way and sang in a niggun of sorts “Moshe Emes Vektoraso Emes.” I wondered if he meant exclusively Moshe Rabeinu or also Moshe Weinberger. I got a smirk from Rav Weinberger for my sharp insight. This story greatly expressed Rav Dovid’s enthusiasm for his life blood- the “heilega” Torah.

Rav Weinberger thankfully began to take a real interest in me and my continued development and I was invited to join an exclusive late Thursday night chaburah in Maharal with Rav Weinberger for a number of years while I practiced law. This weekly dose of Rebbe was what kept me afloat as I worked endless hours in challenging environments. Rav Weinberger played a significant role in guiding me through my intricate shidduchim process and I genuinely felt his empathy for me later in life when things didn’t always go as planned.

When I finally met my wife, I decided to leave my job and spend my initial years of marriage in full-time learning. I was accepted to learn by Rav Yaakov Freidman's yeshiva (birchas mordechai-in beit har) and was a little nervous as I'd be one of the oldest people in the yeshiva plus having spent many years away from full-time learning. I schmoozed with Rav Weinberger about the challenge and his advice to me was "don't be embarrassed to ask someone younger than you to explain the tosfos again if you don't understand it the first time." This was a clear mesorah from his Rebbe of ahavas hatorah.

In 2006, I became Rabbi of the Young Israel of the West Side in Manhattan and I was tasked with learning from and taking over the reins of a historic and illustrious kehilla from the revered and renowned Rabbi Emanuel Gettinger Shlita. I had an opportunity to speak with Rav Ari Waxman during the initial stages of assuming the role and he was keenly interested in knowing about Rav Gettinger and how he was doing. I inquired how he knew Rav Gettinger? He explained that Rav Gettinger replaced his grandfather Rav Dovid as the president of Ezras Torah after Rav Dovid's petirah and that they had worked closely together for many years sharing a very warm and cordial relationship. Amazingly, even in recent years, Rav Dovid hasn't left me. I was again touched by his presence through the indomitable persona of Rav Gettinger.

As twenty years have passed since the petirah of Rav Dovid and entire new generations of his descendants have come into being, it is amazing to me how resoundingly accurate are the words of our chazal. The righteous even after their death are very much still alive and ever-present. Through four very different, yet somehow at the same-time strikingly similar rabbinic personalities, I've merited to capture a tiny bit of the essence of one of the great's of the previous generation. Maybe, just possibly, I carry the name "Dovid" as a hint to the influence on my life of my "Grand-Rebbe"-Rav Dovid Lifschutz-Yeh Zichro Baruch."

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