

My Rebbe's Rebbe

By Rabbi DOVID M. COHEN

I arrived at Yeshiva University in September 1992 and just watched him from a distance. The elderly, distinguished-looking man, with full beard and traditional garb, was frail and always had someone accompanying him while he walked ever so slowly. I yearned to approach and introduce myself but fear held me back.

This great man was Rav Dovid Lifshitz, *zt"l*, the Suwalker Rav, president of Ezras Torah and *rosh yeshiva* at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) for nearly fifty years.

If we never spoke a word, why was I so intrigued by Rav Dovid? The answer can be understood by my first meaningful rebbe/*talmid* relationship. I spent my summer after graduating high school as a counselor for 7th grade boys. These boys had a rebbe who profoundly impacted their lives and who came to visit them in 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 "*chavrusah shaf*."

When I arrived in Israel I was assigned an older *chavrusah* named Rav Ari Waxman. Every night for two hours I would learn *Maseches Sanhedrin* with Rav Ari in his home while enjoying his wife's baked delicacies. There is little doubt I was the envy of most of my classmates that year for having such a desirable night *seider* – "*b'geshem u'bernach*."

Rav Waxman became my first rebbe. We spoke about many concepts in *hashkefa*, 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 the first of what would soon be multitudes of other American boys arriving from Modern Orthodox homes who benefited immensely from his tutelage.

At some point I noticed an arresting picture on his wall and discovered that his maternal grandfather was Rav Dovid Lifshitz. I did not know at the time the magnitude or significance of the man on the wall, but eventually I began to realize how important Rav Dovid was in Rav Ari's life. When Rav Ari attended RIETS he actually lived with his grandparents in their apartment. He attended his grandfather's *shul* and was his constant companion.

Toward 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 *shithei Torah* for the *brisim*. Together we studied and prepared a piece related to *milah* and *priah* from the published *shurim* of his grandfather. It was the culmination of our learning relationship and I felt welcomed into his intimate relationship with his revered *zaide*.

Rav Dovid Lifshitz died on the 9th of Tammuz in 1993. But my connection to my namesake 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 catapulted me toward the rabbinate. My assigned mentor was Rabbi Benjamin Yudin of Fair Lawn, New Jersey. I followed Rabbi Yudin around everywhere and learned from one of the masters how to become an effective and influential pulpit rabbi. I saw some incredible things and it was truly the experience of a lifetime. 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 Swirloff of Paterson, Rav Aharon Kreiser, *z"l*, of Lakewood as well as with Rav Hershel Schachter and Rav Mordechai Willig of RIETS. Interestingly, his prime rebbe in his formative yeshiva years was none other than Rav Dovid Lifshitz.

One anecdote about Rav Dovid that I heard from Rabbi Yudin really stands out in my mind. The story took place at the *bris* of one of the Yudin boys; Rav Dovid was present, of course. After the *milah*, Rav Dovid made his way directly to Rebbetzin Yudin to assure her that everything had gone smoothly and the baby was fine. Rabbi Yudin endeavored to bring this type of *chesed* and sensitivity to his own *rabbanus* and it is something I do as well in my *kehilah*.

In 2000, I began what would be a four-year stint practicing corporate law. 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 strengthen me and keep me spiritually sound. Toward the end of my time in Fair Lawn, Rav Moshe Weinberger of Aish Kodesh in Woodmere, New York, was a guest lecturer in the shul. I had the opportunity to drive him from Woodmere to Fair Lawn and back, and thanks to massive traffic tie-ups I was able to spend about three hours with the rebbe in private conversation. We connected in a profound way; I still give *divrei Torah* I gleaned from that conversation. He also spoke to me about his rebbe – who, it turned out, was Rav Dovid Lifshitz.

I recall Rav Weinberger speaking of Rav Dovid longingly, with a palpable yearning. He told me about the time he was driving Rav Dovid somewhere and shared a *vort* with him. Rav Dovid was so enthused by what he heard that he required Rav Weinberger to stop the car and repeat it to him while they sat on the side of the road. After hearing the *vort* again, Rav Dovid began singing, in a *niggun* of sorts, "*Moshe emes v'Toraso emes*." The story was a striking example of Rav Dovid's enthusiasm for his lifeblood – "the *heilige Torah*."

Thankfully, Rav Weinberger began to take an interest in me and in my development, and I was invited to join a late Thursday night *chaburah* in Maharaal with him for a number of years while I practiced law. This kept me afloat as I worked endless hours in challenging environments. Rav Weinberger played a significant role in guiding me through various life challenges during that time.

When I met my wife, I decided to leave the law and spend my initial years of marriage in full-time learning. I was accepted by a challenging *kollel* and was a bit nervous, as I'd be one of the oldest people in the institution. I spoke with Rav Weinberger 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* of *ahavas haTorah* from his rebbe.

In 2006 I became rabbi of the Young Israel of the West Side in Manhattan and was tasked with taking over the reins of a historic and illustrious *kehillah* from the revered and renowned Rabbi Emanuel Gettinger. I had an opportunity to speak with Rav Ari Waxman during the initial stages of assuming the role and he was interested in knowing about Rav Gettinger. He explained that Rav Gettinger had replaced his grandfather Rav Dovid as president of Ezras Torah after Rav Dovid's *petirah* and that they had worked closely together for many years. Amazingly, the Rav Dovid connection hadn't left me.

Twenty years have passed since the *petirah* of Rav Dovid, and I see how resoundingly accurate are the words of *chazal* – the righteous even after death are very much alive and present. Through my connection with four very different personalities, I've merited to capture a tiny bit of the essence of one of the greats of the previous generation.

Maybe – just possibly – I carry the name Dovid as a hint of what was to be the profound influence on my life – my Grand Rebbe, Rav Dovid Lifshitz, *yehi zichro baruch*.

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