



## TRIBUTE TO A TRUE CHOSSID

*Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita*

Yahrzeits are emotionally charged occasions. They are observed in what may seem a bittersweet fashion. Instead of draping ourselves in sadness, we light candles and seek to sanctify Hashem's name by reciting Kaddish. As years slip by, we tend to remember even more those most cherished moments we shared with loved ones, and although their presence may seem more distant, in fact, upon reflection they live on within our hearts ever stronger.

This last week marked the thirty-ninth year since the petirah of my late Shver ztl, Rav Shlomo Yechiel Grodzinsky. Some of his great great grandchildren gathered around our table, and we spoke of his uniqueness. My father-in-law was a real character. Here was a Polish chassidische Yied, an individual whose entire goal in life was to focus on avodas Hashem. In times gone by a true Polish chossid was unique – and that was no small thing. The idea was for each person to take his uniqueness and use it in a positive manner.

Today this might sound strange. We live in a homogenised society; everyone looks the same. We dress alike and are meant to think as one too. The problem is that such sameness can stifle one's real avodas Hashem.

The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Peshischa, explained that there are many paths to Hashem. Within the gates of the Torah, man can find his unique path that will lead him to his goal of kedusha. By being true to one's own path, one can relate to and respect others who tread a path that is different in nature, but just as true.

All too often, people opt for the simplest route – imitation. "I'll just go along and do whatever everyone else does. That way I won't fall foul." The problem is that one isn't necessarily serving Hashem this way. Rather, he may be serving those

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who set the trends. He may be “in style,” even “cool”, yet never really interacting with the pintele, the inner being that is his neshoma.

My Shver was never satisfied with following the herd. He etched out his own way – and that was his gadlus. I never remember him without an open sefer in hand, yet he didn't push his knowledge or boast about how much he learned. Slowly, steadily, his day would tick by with the soundtrack of his learning. The man said Tehillim any free time he had; in fact, he knew the entire sefer by heart. How did we realise this? Because although in later years he was to all intents and purposes blind, we could still see him saying holy words, steadily turning the pages of his well-worn Tehillim'l.

But you had to look a bit deeper to unearth the “character.” For example, he would wake up every morning before daylight, as soon as he was permitted to say brochos and krias Shema. He had a problem, though. He made a point of having others say amen to his blessings (according to the Darchei Moshe, Orach Chaim 60). What could he do? He would never wake anyone from their sleep. Instead, he would sit near the bed of one of his grandchildren, and somehow, the silent energy of his anticipation would seep through the sleeper's dreams. One could actually feel a presence. The sleeper's eyes would open, and there would be my shver looking down at him. “Oh, you're up. Wash neigel vasser and say amen,” he would exclaim joyfully, his powerful feelings apparent.

There are other examples of his character traits. Every morning, after davening, he had a special mitzvah. Dressed in his jacket, hat and gartel, he'd wash the dishes, and the counters! When he would sit down at the table to listen to the family discussing plans for a future trip, he would say “Ach, what are you talking about? Moshiach will be here soon.” And when he said those words, you knew he lived them. To him, Moshiach was truly only seconds away.

He refused to follow current fashion. When people decided it was time to wear wide-brimmed hats, his was small. You wanted him to wear his hat brim up, fine; he turned it down. He just didn't want to let others set his pace. Gedolei Torah respected his ability in learning, while chassidic Rebbes spoke to him as a dear friend.

One thing was always paramount: He would not lie to himself. As the Kotzker, Zt"l, said, he wouldn't play the shpiel; he wouldn't play act to be what others perceived he should be.

We live in times when choosing an individual path is more important than ever. Young people are wandering and becoming lost to our community. Can this be because we've locked them into a box that doesn't fit them? We are often guilty of starving our young creative neshomas of the oxygen they need to thrive on. They become depressed because they are never really engaged.

What of the thousands of baalei teshuva - those holy neshomos that dearly seek to soak up the warmth of Torah life? Some get caught up with all the dos and don'ts of this homogenisation and become discouraged. They can't understand why so many are not involved with actively perfecting their own souls and instead are fascinated by the state of others. They are astounded that those blessed with a heimishe background are not immersing themselves in all the paths, byways and highways of Yiddishkeit.

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I often watched my Shver's eyes when he did the most mundane of activities. They burned with fire. Nothing – not old age, the tribulations of war nor any of vicissitudes of life – could extinguish this fire.

Preparing the Shabbos candles was an avoda just as vibrant as putting on tefillin for Shacharis – a simple act performed with fiery joy. Is it any wonder he was a towering character?

Even in the confines of his home, that place where many let their public image slip, he was glowing with Yiddishkeit: “Stand up for your mother;” “Don't sit with your back to the seforim shank (bookcase);” “Have you had pas Shacharis (halachically prescribed breakfast)?” Every step, he took with his own pathos, his own way. On those days when one felt depressed, hardly able to face davening, he would say: “Vus? What?” Every tefillah, every bit of Torah study brings brocho to the heavens above. Six million kedoshim! We are left to bring their kedusha to this world!”

I have the zechus to learn with bochurim the sefer Chovos Hatalmidim from the Piasnetza Rebbe ztl. I am astounded time and again by his holy ability to touch on nuances that are recurring in our own struggles today. He wrote for talmidim of all generations and spoke directly to their souls. He mentions time and again the need to become true to oneself and not follow others out of laziness.

In our times we see sweet and holy children become lost to the follies of the secular world because they fear ridicule and a sense of loss if they are not seen as being part of the herd. This is a tragedy; it sucks the life out of their neshomos and drags them down to the abyss. Chinuch is not about teaching per se, it's about giving a student a sense of newness in their individuality so they can be creatively involved in their personal service of Hashem.

I'll end where I started. Just hours before my Shver's petirah, he slipped into a light coma. Those present thought he could no longer respond. My Rebbetzin approached his bedside. “Tatty, it's time to say birchos hashachar. Please, this time you listen and say amen.” She started to say those cherished words.

The Shver's eyes were glazed, yet tears of peacefulness could be seen – and from nowhere, with the pure willpower of that Polish chossid, we all heard, every one of us standing there, “Amen.” Again and again, after every brocho – “Amen, Amen.”

If you don't mind, give me a character like my Shver any time.