

Chag HaSemikha, 5766/2006

- Rabbi Moshe Rosenberg

Sample Sermon Remarks
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After over 40 years of saying shiurim at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, (RIETS), Rav Moshe Ahron Poleyeff, zt'l, went blind. But that didn't stop him from teaching. He simply contracted the cycle of masechtot which he taught to his "favorite" three -- Beitza, Sukka, and Bava Basra. Those were the ones he knew by heart -- Gemarah, Rashi and Tosafos -- and those were the ones he continued to teach. He remarked to his talmidim that as for the other masechtot, of course he knew the Gemarah from memory; it was the Tosafos that were problematic.

This story is emblematic of much of what is special and beautiful about the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, colloquially known as RIETS, which this month celebrates its triennial Chag HaSemikha. Some of the story's elements:

- A Rebbi who knows his Torah not just inside-out, but by heart
- A teacher so eager to teach that even the dimming of his eyesight cannot quell his enthusiasm and sense of mission.
- A man who clearly has a warm relationship with his talmidim, and cares enough to illuminate their lives, even as his is becoming overcast
- Finally a man of principle whose love of Torah, teaching and talmidim cannot persuade him to sacrifice one iota of accuracy even from a single line in Tosafot.

He certainly knew the contents of the Tosafos – that much one can tell just looking at the topics covered in his monumental collection of shiurim reprinted as Orach Meisharim. It was the exact language that he feared he might not give over precisely, somehow marring the Masorah that he had so painstakingly preserved from Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer.

When people talk about RIETS, it always seems to boil down to the Rav—Rav Yosheh Ber Soloveitchik, the colossus who presided over Orthodoxy in America for half a century, and left his indelible imprint on Yeshiva University and generations of its Rabbis. Understandably hidden in his looming shadow are the extraordinary human beings and prodigious talmidei chachomim, like Rav Poleyeff, who taught Torah and guided minds and hearts for decades...not to mention the stellar cadre doing the same every day today.

Here are a couple of people you may not have heard of:

- Rav Ephraim Steinberg, whose second volume of Degel Machane Ephraim was lost in the mail to the publisher, before the days of flash drives, and so he rewrote it from memory.
- Rav Shlomo Polatchek, who was designated by Rav Chaim Brisker as the "Meitscheter Iluy" for his brilliance, but about whom Rav Meir Berlin said that his greatness of character was seven

times his brilliance in Torah

From my own days at Yeshiva, I remember not just Rav Schachter and Rav Parnes and Rav Willig, but Rav Nissan Alpert, z'l, formidable talmid of Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt'l, whose immense scholarship was masked by his unerring intuition as a darshan...Rav Michel Katz, z'l, who was never content addressing a talmid's mind, when he could engage his heart, and who, in his spare time, played mental chess, keeping the board perfectly in his mind...and Rabbi Yosef Wanefsky, z'l, blind for decades, who held court in Gottesman library, dispensing mareh mekomos and stories with equal joy.

Every Rav who came out of RIETS could give you his own list of those whose Torah and character eternally changed him. And that's the point: no two Rabbonim had the same experience, but there was something for each one. Some reveled in the fatherliness of Rav Dovid Lifshitz, some in the analysis of Rav Parnes; some gleefully withstood the acerbic tongue of Rav Yeruchem Gorelick, and some strove to match the self-effacing nature of Rav Abba Bronspigel. Then there were those who had the last laugh on many of us: consigned to the smaller, less-in-demand shiurim, which were cruelly labeled by some as "country club shiurim," they developed a deep and permanent connection to Rabbeim whose style may not have been in vogue, but whose Torah and midos had never gone out of fashion.

And the keshet did not cease when the semikha was granted. Not a week goes by that I don't speak to one of my Rabbeim to talk over a complex shaila that may have arisen. But beyond the immediate need for a psak or an etzah, is an unstated need to reattach myself the Torah of my Yeshiva, embodied by this posek. The other week I bumped into a colleague who told me that he'd just come from the Yeshiva, where he was observing his longstanding custom of spending Rosh Chodesh Adar in the shiur of Rav Moshe Tendler, his Rebbi.

I view these and similar phenomena through the lens of a law concerning Mikvaot: Although drawn water is disqualified from use in a Mikvah, a Mikvah pool comprised entirely of drawn water is acceptable, if it is connected to a Mikvah of living waters through the smallest of openings. This is the law of hashaka, literally, the kiss of one pool to another. Rabbonim who have formed a pool of purity in their own communities can sometimes feel derivative and stagnant, and need these moments, brief as they are, to be kissed once more by the living waters of their Yeshiva's Torah, so that they can continue to strive become a living spring themselves. What I am able to give to others largely is the product of my initial years at RIETS, supplemented by moments of hashaka since.

Today the Torah of the Yeshiva is flowing to the larger community like never before. Just take a look at YUtorah.org to find thousands of shiurim available for listening and downloading. 277 from Rabbi Michael Rosensweig alone! 455 from Rav Schachter... 525 from Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky...and on and on.

And, as has always been the case, more than Torah knowledge is being passed along. When a member of our community (Kew Gardens Hills, Queens – MR.) lost his wife after a long battle with cancer, it was one of the younger YU Rabbeim who gave him the time, the ear and the love he needed to be able to go on with life. When my parents lay in the hospital during their final illnesses and questions came up which I was not comfortable answering myself, it was to one of

my Rabbeim that I turned – certainly for halakha, but for understanding, as well.

During this season when so many parashot deal with the concepts of Mishkan and Mikdash, our thoughts turn to that special rock, called even shetiya, which, according to tradition, was the point of origin from which Hakadosh Baruch Hu began creation. The even shetiya was located on the floor of the Holy of Holies, between the two staves attached to the sides of the Aron Kodesh. Chazal liken the staves, which protruded through the parokhet, to the shadayim, the bosom, thus associating them with images of love and nourishment. For me and so many other Rabbonim, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Seminary is our point of origin, our even shetiya, which provided love and nourishment, along with the Torah symbolized by the Aron Kodesh. For us, attending the Chag HaSemikha will be an act of hashaka and a visit to our point of origin, revisiting the place where Hashem first spoke to us from between the Keruvim in the voices of our illustrious teachers. It is where we see our contemporaries having become Roshei Yeshiva themselves and taking care to see that their Mikvah ever remain a source of living waters, and a place from whose love and nourishment, new worlds can be formed.