

# Growing up in Boston: An Interview with Meira Davis

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*The Torah-To-Go editorial staff presented a series of questions to Rebbetzin Meira Davis about her experiences growing up in Brookline, MA, where the Rav served as the mara d'atra (spiritual leader of the community).<sup>1</sup>*

## **What are some of your earliest memories of the Rav?**

My first awareness of the existence of the Rav developed when I began attending Maimonides School in Dorchester, Massachusetts in the fourth grade. Two of my classmates were Judy Meiselman and Lewis Gerber, a niece and a nephew of Rabbi Soloveitchik, the founder of the school. I spent occasional Shabbatot in Onset, Massachusetts (near Cape Cod), with Judy and her parents, her sister and brother, now Rav Moshe Meiselman. In those years, the Rav would spend the summers learning in Onset. Years later, my parents bought a cottage there, which is still used every summer by their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The presence of the Rav still proudly lingers in the shul, Congregation Beth Israel of Onset.

When my family moved from Malden, Massachusetts to Brookline in 1960, my father, Mr. Erwin Katz, became very involved in various aspects of our shul, the Young Israel of Brookline, as well as Maimonides School. As a prime mover in fundraising for both of these institutions and as chairman of the school's tuition scholarship committee for many years, my father had numerous opportunities to meet with the Rav and to enlist his help in fundraising. The Rav readily acquiesced to any request to help strengthen the greater community. My cousin, Ronny Wachtel, recalls the *chanukat habayit* (building dedication) of the Young Israel of Brookline with the Rav affixing the mezuzah on the front door of the shul. My sister, Yonina, remembers hearing of the occasion when my father invited some prospective donors for the Young Israel to a breakfast and promised them a surprise speaker. While the guests were eating their bagels, my father left the



The Rav and Mr. Erwin Katz

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<sup>1</sup> To respond to the questions for this interview, Rebbetzin Davis connected with her siblings, Yonina Langer, Debbie Cohen and Naty Katz, and her cousin Ronny Wachtel, to share and compare their recollections of the Rav from their youth in Brookline.

shul to pick up the Rav, who addressed the group about the importance of supporting a community synagogue.

We perceived the Rav as the chief rabbi of Boston. In deference to the Rav, the *eruv* in Boston was not built while he was alive. In his earlier years, he was involved with local kashrut issues.

As we grew older, we realized that the Rav's presence and his Torah dominated the Maimonides School, particularly through the teaching of Rabbi Isaiah Wohlgemuth and Rabbi Isaac Simon. The Rav's wife, Dr. Tonya Soloveitchik, was the chairman of the School Committee all the years I was at Maimonides and was succeeded by her daughter, Mrs. Atara Twersky. Our classes were all coed, including Gemara, which both girls and boys studied. Some mornings the Rav would daven with the students' minyan.

Ronny adds: I remember, in the Rav's later years, that whenever I was home in Brookline and would daven at Maimonides on Sunday morning, I would always receive a warm handshake when I approached him after davening.

The connection to the Rav continues in our family. The Rav was the scheduled *mesader kidushin* (officiating rabbi) at all of the Katz children's weddings. (Unfortunately, he was ill the day of our wedding and Rabbi Shlomo Riskin officiated with Rabbi Saul Berman who was the rabbi of the Young Israel of Brookline at that time.) My husband, Eddie Davis, learned in the Rav's *shiur* at Yeshiva University, and received *semicha* from the Rav. My sister-in-law, Amy Katz, spent several years as the Executive Director of the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Institute, which was housed at Maimonides School. Her husband, my brother, Naty Katz, who spent his share of time as a student in the office of the principal, Rabbi Moses J. Cohn, is now the Head of School of Maimonides School, very dedicated to preserving and passing on the Torah, philosophy, and teachings of the Rav.

### **How did the Rav's Torah scholarship influence the community?**

There are two things that come to mind. First, the Motza'ei Shabbat *shiur* that the Rav gave for many years was a highlight of the week for many Boston *baalebatim* (lay people) and the students of local colleges who came to hear him. The Boston *baalebatim* were very loyal and very dear to the Rav and the Rav's *shiur* was the place to be on Motza'ei Shabbat.

Second, for a number of years, the Rav held a Yeshiva University Summer Kollel at the Young Israel of Brookline. Young men would come from New York to spend several weeks studying with the Rav. My mother, Mrs. Lotte Katz, arranged all the housing for every participant. My father single-handedly raised the money to cover the costs of the kollel and made arrangements with Mrs. Irene Loketch to cater all the meals. At my grandson's recent Bar Mitzvah in January, I met a fellow who told me how much he enjoyed the privilege of being part of that kollel and the opportunity to learn with the Rav for few weeks while staying at the home of my sister, Debbie Cohen.

### **Do you, who grew up in Boston, and your husband, Rabbi Eddie Davis, who was a student of the Rav at Yeshiva, have different perceptions of the Rav?**

The question reminds me of the following story. One weekend, when my husband Eddie and I were visiting my parents, Eddie went to his rebbe's Saturday night *shiur* at Maimonides. He saw

how the Rav answered the people's questions gently and with great patience— differently from what he experienced in his YU *shiur*. At YU the Rav demanded that his *talmidim* present well-researched, precise questions that he would not hesitate to challenge. Sitting among the Boston baalebatim, Eddie asked the Rav a question, not even sure the Rav would realize who he was. The Rav's immediate response: "No, no, no, Davis, no, no!" The Rav clearly recognized him as a *talmid*, not one of the Boston congregants.

My cousin, Ronny, shared with me that he would travel from Malden to Dorchester on Motza'ai Shabbat to attend the Rav's *shiur*, which in those days was delivered in Yiddish. He recalls numerous instances where the Rav was extremely demanding of some of his former *talmidim* when they asked questions during the *shiur*. His responses were not in the least bit "gentle."

The Rav was very close with Dr. Maish and Mrs. Hannah Lightman and their family from out-of-town Lowell, Massachusetts, truly befriending them and bringing them closer to Yiddishkeit. He took them under his wing, making sure that the children's educational and general needs would be met. As a close friend of some of the Lightman children, I was very impressed and in awe of the Rav's personal involvement with their family.

**What personal anecdotes can you share that give us further insights into the Rav's personality?**

- The Rav's sense of humor was evident in two incidents at my brother's wedding in 1978. A few years earlier, my husband Eddie had asked the Rav for permission to switch his Hebrew pronunciation from *Ashkenazit* to *Sefaradit* to eliminate the confusion between *Ashkenazit* in our home and *Sefaradit* in the school that our children were attending in Richmond, Virginia, where we were living. The Rav agreed. At the wedding, Eddie, recited the final *bracha* of the *Sheva Brachot* in *Sefaradit*. After the chuppah, the Rav remarked to Eddie, "So you moved down South and you developed a southern accent?"
- The photographer then set up a photo-op with, the Rav, Rabbi Shimon Romm, the chatan (my brother Naty), our father, and Naty's brand-new father-in-law, Rabbi William Herskowitz, who was a *talmid* of the Rav and had a warm personal relationship with him for many years. Rabbi Herskowitz turned to the Rav and said, "Rebbe, I have a great picture of you from last Tuesday night's *shiur*." Without missing a beat, the Rav responded, "It's okay Billy, I don't need the picture. I have the original."
- My sister Debbie remembers that when the Rav would come to our home to meet with our father about tuition scholarships for Maimonides students, our mother would offer him a plate of homemade cookies. A photograph of one of these meetings hangs next to my husband's *semicha* on our wall. Debbie also recalls that the Rav would pay a surprise



Wedding of Naty Katz and Amy Herskowitz, September 3, 1978 Left to right: Rabbi Shimon Romm, (Naty's rebbe), Rabbi William Herskowitz, (Naty's father-in-law), Naty, the Rav, Erwin Katz (Naty's father)

visit to her *limudei kodesh* (Jewish studies) classroom and sit in the back and observe. He was probably the only comfortable person in the room.

- On Sunday mornings, my father made Naty leave his friends at the ice-skating rink early so he could attend the Rav's Talmud shiur at Maimonides, under duress. Naty, who was in high school at the time, was amazed at how the Rav would patiently explain each concept several times in different ways, and present complex, big ideas in tiny, bite-sized pieces so that people on every level, from beginner to Talmid Chacham, could understand it at their own personal level -- what educators today call differentiated instruction for diverse learners. Naty enjoyed the shiur as a seventeen-year-old Maimonides student, but when he would later hear two adults discussing the shiur, he could not follow -- their conversation was on a different, much higher plane.
- The Rav's wife was very protective of her husband's time and space. My sister Yonina recalls our father telling her about the time he went to the Rav's house to speak with him, knocked on the door, and Mrs. Soloveitchik said that the Rav could not see him. From behind, the Rav asked, "Who is at the door?" She responded, "Mr. Katz." The Rav said, "Please show Mr. Katz in." The Rav's moral support, physical assistance, words of encouragement and *brachot* were very helpful in allowing my father to forge ahead, very successfully, with the help of Hashem, in his *avodat hakodesh* (Jewish communal service) for the benefit of the *klal* and to help build the Brookline community.

### **What experiences/qualities of growing up in Boston have you incorporated into your work as a rebbetzin?**

Growing up in Boston afforded me several life-enriching experiences for which I am very grateful and which have enhanced my ability to serve the community as a rebbetzin. I was privileged to attend Maimonides School where I received a superior education in Judaic studies and secular studies—and the basis for a deep appreciation of the synthesis of Torah Umadda. Thanks to seven years of Hebrew language studies with Mar Yaakov Lamdan, I became proficient enough in Hebrew to communicate well with Hebrew speakers.

Boston is a college town—Harvard, M.I.T., Boston University and many more. The fact that the Rav was giving *shiurim* every Saturday night must have been an added attraction for some of the serious students who wanted to attend a regular *shiur* from a *gadol hador*, while pursuing their secular education at elite universities in Boston. Many frum students appeared at the Young Israel of Brookline on Friday nights and Shabbat mornings. Prior to our arrival in Brookline, Mr. Moses Feuerstein and his dear wife, Mrs. Shirley Feuerstein, had already hosted many students over the years. When our family moved to Brookline, my father also approached the students and made arrangements for those who wished to join a family for a Shabbat meal. Needless to say, our table always had numerous unexpected guests, enabling me to learn how to relate to all kinds of people and to appreciate the beauty of an open house and the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim*—which have been invaluable assets to me as a rebbetzin. I am deeply grateful to my parents for being loving role models of the actions and contributions required to develop and maintain a growing community and to bring people closer to Hashem.