

In Tribute to Rav Hershel Schachter

by Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman '98R '06YY
Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS



Even before I was registered in his shiur, I wanted to be a student of Rav Hershel Schachter, *shlit"u*. As a high school student, I had become aware of his reputation as a world-class Torah scholar and masterful teacher, and sought out opportunities to learn from him. A few times, my schedule allowed me to attend his Thursday morning Parshah shiur, and I thrilled to the experience of hearing him compress into one session a rapid fire, wide-ranging tour of halakhah, *lomdus*, *parshanus*, and *haskafah*, all delivered in an accessible tone that made it seem effortless.

I soon realized that Rav Schachter's greatness was not only of degree, but of kind. He was, quite simply, on a whole different level, and it was not only because of the volume of information he retained.

This realization was built upon the impression created by how others spoke of him and related to him. As a student in Kerem B'Yavneh, I saw how Rav Schachter's visits and guest lectures were greeted by unique enthusiasm and deference from the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav C.Y. Goldvicht zt"l, who would, atypically, attend and participate in all of his shiurim. As I started formally in Rav Schachter's shiur, my cousin, the Rosh Yeshiva of an Israeli Yeshiva, exhorted me to pay careful attention. "Other Roshei Yeshiva," he said, "take the [writings of] the *Dvar Avraham* [for example], add a little bit, and present it as their own chiddush. Rav Schachter will say a huge chiddush, and will hide it behind a *Dvar Avraham*."

However, all of this did not prepare me for the full scope of Rav Schachter's greatness. One weekday morning, during the early days of my time in his shiur, opened up a new perspective.

I was attending a bris. The baby was the first-born son of an outstanding mechanech, who at that time was at the very beginning of his career in education. Filled with excitement for the birth of his son and the opportunity for this mitzvah, the young father delivered a very learned and lengthy derashah during the festive meal that followed. Unfortunately, the diverse crowd that had gathered for the event was more aware of the length than of the learning. As the speech continued, the impatience of those assembled became palpable. Tension filled the room as family members tried to signal that the speech should wrap up, and the discomfort of the situation visibly extended to the speaker himself. In the awkward aftermath of this unappreciated discourse, the crowd was asked to sit for one more speaker: Rav Hershel Schachter.

Unlike the others present that morning, I didn't have to go to work that day. I sat back and looked forward to being dazzled by the scholarly presentation this *gadol b'yisrael* was sure to give. Indeed, Rav Schachter did dazzle us, but not in the way I expected.

Rav Schachter spoke for less than three minutes. He began by noting what seemed to be an unusual custom in that community. Typically, when a bris takes place on a morning when the Torah is



Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman '98R '06YY

read, the father of the baby is given an aliyah. Yet that morning, all the aliyos had gone to others. Rav Schachter said that at first, he was puzzled by this; however, once he came down to the meal, he understood why that was.

He quoted Rav Soloveichik's explanation as to why the father usually does get an aliyah. The father is in a state of simcha, of joy, and he wants to share that feeling with everyone else. The main manifestation of joy is Torah study. The reading of Torah in the synagogue is a form of teaching Torah to the public. One who receives an aliyah is therefore involved in public teaching of Torah (originally, the *oleh* was the reader as well; now the practice is that the *oleh* reads quietly together with the *ba'al korei*). Thus, the father traditionally receives an aliyah so that he can share his simchah with all of his guests.

Rav Schachter proceeded to explain how during the meal he understood why there was no need to give the father an aliyah that morning. Usually, the aliyah

is the most effective way for the father to teach Torah to the public. However, that morning, there was a special opportunity. The father — Rav Schachter was careful to refer to the young rebbe as “a colleague of mine” — was clearly an outstanding scholar. That morning, he explained, those assembled had the privilege of seeing this concept of spreading simchah through Torah in its most ideal form, the way it was originally intended. A community and a family that produced someone capable of a drashah such as the one we had just heard is clearly blessed, and will continue to be blessed. With that, Rav Schachter returned to his seat.

It took me a little while to fully process just how much Rav Schachter had accomplished in those three minutes. He said an actual, substantive dvar Torah that taught something to everyone. In the gentlest form imaginable, he gave mussar to the crowd that displayed impatience, and taught them to appreciate the young scholar in their midst. He lifted the spirits of the father, and quickly erased any embarrassment he had felt just a few minutes before. And he did all this while personifying the topic he was explaining: “Torah is Simchah.”

Of course, Rav Schachter had no need to show to us that morning how much he knew. Instead, he taught us all a much greater lesson in showing us how much he cared.

Indeed, showing how much one knows is never meant to be the goal. In fact, the Talmud teaches, “One should always train himself to say, ‘I don’t know.’” (Berachos 4a). As anyone who has spent one day in Rav Schachter’s shiur knows, there is, perhaps paradoxically, no one more ready to say those three words than he is. But more than that, it is how he says those three words (often adding another two: “could be”) that teaches so much. At once, he is able to convey humility, respect for the opinions of others, empathy, a desire for constant growth, and an appreciation for the vastness of Torah.

Sometimes, he conveys the most without saying any words. His frequent emotional reactions, whether to the suffering of those in front of him, to reminders of the long exile of the Jewish people, or to passages in the Talmud that carry particular resonance, are lessons in and of themselves.

In recent years, I have had the privilege to assist him in minor ways in his efforts to advocate on behalf of agunos, and against injustice in general. The needs of the Jewish people and of the world are great. Sometimes, they can only be addressed by a singular figure who combines rock-solid halakhic authority, massive interpersonal empathy, and a willingness to take on the suffering of others, regardless of personal cost.

The fact is this cost is very real, and takes on many forms, and yet has never deterred Rav Schachter from doing what he feels is right. Often, I have had the experience of communicating with people thousands of miles away dealing with some of the difficult situations described, and asking, “what can help here?” I receive the answer: “A call from Rav Hershel Schachter would help.” And just like that, one more phone call, one more letter, one more mediation, is added to his seemingly endless list of responsibilities.

Currently, I have the profound privilege to teach students of our Yeshiva. I spend my mornings and early afternoons with them, and we are situated on the

second floor balcony of the new Glueck Beis Midrash. From our vantage point, we can view Rav Schachter’s seat at the front of the first floor of the Beis Midrash.

It is a wonderful benefit that we have, knowing that just a short staircase away, such a resource is available, should we encounter a difficult passage in Tosafos, an important halakhic issue, or if there is need to consult as to what action can be taken to relieve the suffering of an agunah or to address a pressing communal concern. However, I realize that there is so much we can gain without even leaving our seats upstairs.

From my elevated perch, I can watch Rav Schachter as the constant stream of people approach him. I can see as he lifts his head from his beloved Gemara, or as a chavrusa of the moment is asked to pause once again for another interruption. I can’t hear the words, but I can see. I can see the smile, the gentle eyes, the sensitive look, the empathetic expression, the patient explanation taking place. I can watch as whoever it is — a prominent rabbinic figure, a struggling yeshiva student, a visiting elementary school group, a communal leader, an individual in personal anguish, a public high school student — is treated with respect, attention, and concern. I watch and I realize just how fortunate I actually am. So many years after I first registered in Rav Schachter’s shiur, I’m still sitting in his classroom. ■

