

Inseparable, in Life and in Death

By Rabbi Moshe Taragin

This week's article is dedicated to the neshamas of two of my talmidim, who fell defending our people and our land.

Death has ascended our windows and entered our homes. It has taken children from our roads and youth from our streets. (Yirmiyahu, ch. 9)

Last week two talmidim of Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, who had studied in my shiur, fell during battle in Aza. It was a devastating week for the families whose lives were shattered by this unspeakable tragedy. The death of these two boys, lifelong friends, rippled through the entire Jewish world. As their rebbe, I am grieving.

These two soldier-scholars lived similar, tragically shortened, lives. Each of their fathers studied in our yeshiva and raised Torah-committed families upon the values they absorbed decades ago. Their sons profoundly identified with our yeshiva and relished the opportunity to continue their family legacy by studying in their fathers' beit midrash.

Dovid Schwartz' family is a native Israeli family, whereas Yakir Hexter's parents made aliyah from the United States. The pairing of these two families provides a sad but fitting metaphor for our yeshiva, which has been a flagship hesder yeshiva for over 50 years, while also assisting thousands of students in transitioning to aliyah.

A part of our yeshiva has been torn away and has left a gaping hole. As their rebbe, I mourn, holding back tears and clearing lumps in my throat.

Dovid

Dovid Schwartz had an incandescent smile which never left his face, radiated instant happiness, and literally climbed into your heart. He displayed quiet, understated leadership which was never aggressive or controlling. He always assumed responsibility, organizing group events or scheduling changes. He was a truth-seeker, possessing deep personal conviction, yet always eager to receive helpful input from his teachers. Even after leaving yeshiva, he would periodically "check-in" with me for guidance, as he transitioned to the next stage.

His intellectual curiosity inspired him to look beyond his natural setting for religious inspiration and personal growth. Though he was raised and schooled in a National Religious context, he was a regular at Chassidic tishes and shiurim. At his request, I started a weekly shiur on Chassidut in our yeshiva, though we don't typically stress this area of study. He scrupulously maintained this weekly shiur even during the difficult conditions of corona. He deeply enjoyed parshat hashavua, publishing a collection of his own divrei Torah in honor of his wedding.

He was deeply spiritual, yet remarkably practical, humble but strong of will. He was extremely conscientious and took meticulous notes of each shiur. Conscious that religious identity should be simple but compelling he hung three handwritten pesukim above his bed. One of them captures his short life: "I will rely upon Your kindness, my heart will rejoice in Your deliverance." (Tehillim ch. 13)

Yakir

Yakir Hexter was immensely driven, holding himself to extremely high personal standards. He enjoyed learning Mesillat Yesarim, a classic mussar work which lays out a detailed roadmap for religious development. Yet he was humble about his achievements and was extremely tolerant of those who couldn't or didn't match his own lofty expectations.

As the iconic picture of him studying with Dovid illustrates, Yakir was an exceptional listener and excelled at making other people feel heard and seen. He had embarked on a degree in architecture, which was true to his extraordinary ability to create space for other people. He was a magnet for English-speaking students looking for a shoulder to lean on or in need of a friendly shmooze.

Extremely modest, his smile wasn't radiant or overpowering, but inconspicuous, charming and endearing. His smile never outshone others, but invited them to reciprocate with their own smile and their own happiness. He never drowned out others in the room.

He was artistic, and an original thinker who exhibited broad intellectual sweep. Additionally, he possessed strong moral integrity and conscientiously donated charity from his various side incomes. As he deeply valued time as a commodity, he also allocated specific hours to support the needy.

He possessed a strong moral fiber, and also knew how to let loose with friends, be mischievous, and have fun. He combined finesse, imagination, modesty, moral integrity, intensity and sensitivity.

Delicate, but Strong

One of the nicknames of Dovid Hamelech was עדין העצני . The first term, "Adino," stems from the root "adin" which means sensitive or gentle. By contrast, the second word of this nickname "ha'etzni" evokes the image of a strong and durable tree, or an "etz." Noticing this contrast, Chazal extolled Dovid Hamelech for combining spiritual sensitivity with military prowess. While in the beit midrash he was soft and tranquil, but when called to the battlefield he morphed into a toughened and hard-edged soldier.

For thousands of years our children weren't forced to undergo this metamorphosis. I am grateful for the privilege of watching my students morph from thoughtful and sensitive Torah students into courageous and brave soldiers. Sadly, as we continue to see, there is a steep price to pay for this historical privilege.

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Humbled by Talmidim

The Talmud concludes that a rebbe gains wisdom from his students, ומתלמידי יותר מכולם. Obviously, as the study of Torah is centered on give-and-take, interaction with students yields new intellectual perspectives. Students bring fresh sets of eyes and novel approaches to Torah study.

However, a rebbe is also educated and inspired by observing his talmidim apply his values and teachings, often more successfully than he himself is capable of. As I reflect on the passion and commitment of Dovid and Yakir, I wonder if I can ever live up to my own example.

The commitment that Dovid and Yakir displayed toward our people and country humbles me. Obviously, I tried to instill passion and selflessness in them, but watching them risk everything for our nation and, sadly, sacrifice their lives, leaves me astonished. I am expected to provide leadership and inspiration, but I am humbled by their extraordinary commitment and hope to Hashem that I can be worthy of the privilege He gave me to teach them during their brief time on this Earth.

Potential Unfulfilled

A rebbe looks into the future, planting seeds which one day, b'ezrat Hashem, will germinate into a life of Torah, morality, family, country and idealism. Every talmid brings a world of potential and possibility. Tragically my hopes and dreams for Dovid and Yakir have now been cut short. All that remains is a gaping hole of potential unfulfilled. In place of a future, there is only sadness.

Amidst the gloom, I take one slight solace, knowing that they returned to Hashem in pure and unsullied innocence. People who die at an advanced age, bear the scars, frustration, and failure which this world brings. Hashem created us pure and perfect, yet life breaks us down. As Dovid and Yakir were just beginning their life's journey, they hadn't yet been blemished by the pain of this world. They returned to Hashem pure and pristine, just as He created them. The pure souls that Hashem delivered to us have been returned practically untarnished.

Friends

Their death is even more painful given the strong friendship they enjoyed throughout their life. Dovid and Yakir befriended each other in high school and maintained their bond through yeshiva, army training, and officers training. They served together until their death. They lived most of their lives locked in loving friendship and ascended to Heaven together. The iconic picture of them studying in our Beit Midrash captures the exquisite beauty and agonizing pain of their friendship, in life and in death.

Our people are recovering from a terrible year of strife and social discord. The war has involuntarily thrust unity upon us, and we are currently riding a euphoric wave of national solidarity. We all seek ways to preserve this national unity for the long term. Perhaps we should improve our own friendships, with our personal friends, but also

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with every member of our nation. Friends can disagree, but their bond of friendship cannot fray.

My revered Rebbe, Rav Amital, who suffered the loss of eight talmidim during the Yom Kippur War, delivered passionate sichot prior to Neilah and the closure of Yom Kippur. He assured us that Hashem listens to the broken-hearted. A Jew who lives history is broken-hearted. לב נשבר ונדכה אלקים לא תבוזה

We are broken-hearted by the loss of Dovid and Yakir. I will miss them each dearly. Tragically, there is already half a minyan of Gush talmidim in Shamayim. Please Hashem, end our suffering and protect all of our soldiers.

The writer is a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, a hesder yeshiva. He has smicha and a BA in computer science from Yeshiva University as well as a masters degree in English literature from the City University of New York