

The Power to Triumph

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Tisha B'Av is a day of sadness for the Jewish people, the day of mourning for the many tragedies that befell our people throughout the year and during the days of Av. This year, two more tragedies were added to the list, for it was on Tisha B'Av that levayos were held for two outstanding treasures of Klal Yisroel who passed away after suffering from disease for many years.

Rav Uri Mandelbaum of Philadelphia and Rav Yaakov Rajchenbach of Chicago were well known for their sterling character, generosity, and devotion to Torah and its causes.

They came from similar roots.

Rav Uri was born in Hamburg, Germany, fleeing with his family, arriving in Detroit in 1941. As all Jewish children in Detroit, he attended public school and Hebrew school, for there was no yeshiva in town. In 1945, Bais Yehudah opened as a half-day yeshiva, where the boys would learn part of the day in yeshiva and the other part in public school.

The yeshiva was headed by Rav Leib Bakst and Rav Simcha Wasserman. When Rav Uri was 17, Rav Bakst suggested that he go to Lakewood for a summer zeman. He enjoyed being in the yeshiva and returned for the following summer zeman as well. The third year, he went for the summer zeman and remained for Elul zeman, too. The rosh yeshiva, Rav Aharon Kotler, observed the potential in the young out-of-towner and saw to it that he was convinced to stay in Lakewood.

Rav Mandelbaum went to the Philadelphia Yeshiva as a talmid, was later chosen to serve as a rebbi, eventually rising to the position of menahel. His devotion to the yeshiva, of which he was part almost since its founding, was all encompassing. There was nothing that he would not do for the yeshiva.

Much the same was his dedication to the yeshiva's bochurim, who knew that they could always count on him for whatever they needed. His home was always open to all, and many sought comfort and solace there. He and his wife provided a home away from home for the bochurim, providing them with chizuk and whatever else it was that they needed.

He never seemed to tire, and many wondered when and if he ever slept. His life revolved around Torah and chesed and raising his wonderful family. There was little time for rest.

When he became ill and began losing his physical abilities, he worked as hard as he could to continue his life of Torah and chesed. He would spend an entire week producing a vort on the parsha to distribute to his children, painstakingly utilizing his ebbing strength to type one letter at a time.

By doing so, he imparted to his family not only precious Torah thoughts, but also a portrayal of the way a Yid lives. Despite terrible nisyonos of a debilitating disease, he demonstrated with much strength and determination the tachlis of life, never complaining, accepting all with considerable emunah, and setting an example for his beautiful family and all who knew him.

In a phenomenal tribute, his children published a collection of those divrei Torah in a two-volume sefer called Meorei Ho'eish.

Rav Yankel Rajchenbach was well known for his exceptional character and devotion to Torah and its many causes. Nothing came easy for him. His life was full of challenges, which he overcame with his emunah, bitachon, inbred optimism, and determination.

Born in Lodz, Poland to refugees from the war, he was ill as a baby and the family was then forced to remain in Poland for ten years when the Communists assumed power. When they were finally allowed to leave ten years later, the family first moved to Israel before settling in Omaha, Nebraska, where Mrs. Rajchenbach had a brother.

Little Yankel was enrolled in the local public school, where he remained until his bar mitzvah. It was then that his father told his mother that they had to send him away to yeshiva in New York so that he would remain a frum Yid. For two years, he learned in a New York yeshiva, traveling back and forth via a grueling 34-hour bus ride.

When Rav Shmuel Faivelson and Rav Naftoli Hirschfeld opened a yeshiva in St. Louis, much closer to Omaha, he went there, a fateful move that would change and impact him for the rest of his life.

Imagine what that boy went through and what life must have been like for him, steady nisyonos molding his character and personality.

After years of aliyah in St. Louis and then in Chicago, he married his eizer kenegdo, who stood by his side since then, supporting and assisting him in all he did to benefit Klal Yisroel and raising an exemplary family. He then went to Eretz Yisroel, where he learned in kollel with mesirus nefesh, until fate returned them to Chicago and Reb Yankel needed to work to feed his family.

His life was well lived, a steady incline of growth and maasim tovim, first on a local scale and then nationally and internationally. When he became ill several years ago, he faced his nisayon with steeled determination rooted in emunah and bitachon, fighting on and continuing as much as he could with all that he did.

It was a Motzoei Yom Kippur in the Mirrer Yeshiva. Far from the familiar embrace of the hallowed building in Mir D'Lita, the yeshiva was in its temporary home in Shanghai. The holiest day of the year had just ended. A cloud of intensity and emotion had filled the large Bais Aharon shul, headquarters of hundreds of Mirrer refugees. The echoes of the day's powerful prayers for themselves and their loved ones still in danger were reverberating off its walls.

The talmidei chachomim of the yeshiva had left to break their fast, removing their hats and jackets after a long, oppressively hot day. A lone figure remained in the cavernous room. The mythical mashgiach, Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, lingered in the bais medrash, walking back and forth, talking to himself in soft and mournful tones. His countenance, always luminous, was angelic at that exalted moment.

The mashgiach had not sat down throughout the long day. His Shemoneh Esrei of Shacharis continued until krias haTorah, when he was called for the aliyah of levi. His Mussaf continued until the start of Mincha, and again he remained standing in his Shemonah Esrei until just before Ne'ilah. At that time, he offered words of chizuk to the talmidim, ushering forth a last wave of energy before Yom Kippur concluded.

Now, with everyone gone, the mashgiach stood in the empty bais medrash, speaking gently. "Sometimes a person is able to raise himself and achieve great heights," the mashgiach said, "but what happens is that after a while at that exalted level, he returns to being the same person he was. Why do we lose the roishem, the impression, of teshuvah?" The mashgiach left the question hanging and then concluded, "A person must work his entire life to be omeid b'nisayon, acquiring and internalizing the means to do battle and succeed."

The goal of life is to be able to constantly work on elevating ourselves. The objective is to continuously seek to improve ourselves. Rav Uri and Reb Yankel both excelled in doing that from when they were youngsters until and including their final illnesses.

Life is an ongoing process, and without constant growth, it is futile. In life, the nisyonos keep coming. There is seemingly no rest from them. Our task is to continue rising, reaching the next level, firming up, and moving up to the next rung.

And that is what Rav Uri and Reb Yankel spent their lives doing, setting examples for all to follow.

The Alter of Kelm once said to his talmidim before Rosh Hashanah, “What is the worst gezeirah possible for us in the new year? That it will be exactly the same as the year before.”

When Goliath was wreaking havoc amongst the ranks of Klal Yisroel’s army, a young shepherd showed up at the front to bring provisions to his brother. His name was Dovid. When he arrived at the encampment, he was disturbed by the power of that rasha and the reaction of Klal Yisroel. “Ki mi haPlishti ha’arel hazeh? Who does this impure Plishti think he is that he might mock and taunt the ranks of Elokim Chaim?” (Shmuel I 17:28).

Dovid’s older brother was upset at him, thinking that he had come to the front merely to watch “the action.” Dovid’s fighting words were passed on to Shaul Hamelech, and the young shepherd was brought before the king.

Upon meeting him, Shaul was convinced that the physically unimposing Dovid could never battle the towering Goliath. Dovid reassured him. “Your servant was a shepherd...and a lion and a bear came and lifted one of the sheep from the flock. And I went after and killed it and saved the sheep from its mouth... Both the lion and the bear your servant smote – and this Plishti will be as one of them...” (Shmuel I 17:34-36).

On the posuk that tells of the sheep, a seh, there is a mesorah of kri and ksiv – that the word is written as zeh, meaning this, but read as seh, meaning sheep.

The Vilna Gaon explains the interchanging of the word seh with zeh. Dovid Hamelech had a miracle happen to him. He was able to kill a wild beast with his bare hands. He understood that if Hashem allowed this to happen, there was a deeper purpose to what had transpired and a lesson for him for life. Dovid was determined to remember the incident so that when further nisyonos arose, he would recall that he had the power to triumph. He wanted to maintain the level.

The Gaon quotes a Medrash which states that Dovid cut off some wool from the sheep whose life he saved and made himself a cloak from that wool.

With this, the Gaon explains the depth of the mesorah in reading the posuk. “Venasa seh meiha’eider” is rendered as “Venasa zeh meiha’eider,” because Dovid would wear that cloak and point to it and say, “Zeh! This is from the wool of the sheep that was attacked by a lion, which I killed with my bare hands. Hashem allowed me to experience this miracle and I want to make sure I will remember it.”

Greatness is not something we are born with, but is achieved through a lifetime of work and much effort. Great people make it look easy, but it never is.

Rav Uri Mandelbaum never stopped doing and working on behalf of the yeshiva and its bochurim, as long as he was able to. His devotion and hisbatlus to the roshei yeshiva and other members of the hanhala knew no limits. He lived for others. He didn’t just learn mussar. He lived mussar.

Though he went on to earn prosperity and stature, Rav Yaakov Rajchenbach never forgot his humble beginnings, the years of poverty. He never looked down at anyone and was unfailingly kind and welcoming to all. He remembered when he couldn’t afford to buy chicken for Shabbos, and throughout all of his many achievements, he never grew haughty or self-important.

He never forgot his years in Omaha and the mesirus nefesh on the part of his parents and himself that he remain “ah frummeh Yid.” He worked b’lev v’nefesh for chinuch yaldei Yisroel, doing what he could to commit generations of Jews to Torah through day school and yeshiva education.

He never forgot what his rebbi did for him and remained close to him all the years he was able to. He worked to establish kollelim in Chicago and elsewhere, and was a prime supporter of the Chicago Telshe Yeshiva, where he had a daily learning seder. He was extremely respectful of roshei yeshiva and rabbonim, and deferential to their wishes and demands.

And now these two giants have entered the pantheon of Jewish treasures, their levayos on Tisha B’Av signaling the tragedy of their loss. May we be zoche to the speedy coming of Moshiach, when this day of sadness will become a day of joy and celebration.