

Rav Shea Fishman zt"l

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Some people come into your life and never really leave. They make a mark on you, influencing, inspiring and teaching. Such a person was Rav Yehoshua Zvi Fishman zt"l, who passed away last week following a lingering illness.

It was some thirty-five years ago that we met...well, sort of. I had heard his name, but never had the pleasure of meeting him. One year, he was the guest speaker at the dinner of Bais Medrash Govoah of Lakewood. I listened to his speech and he took my breath away. He was so full of Torah and machshovah and conviction and heart. I had never heard anyone speak like that. Upon hearing the speech, I decided that I wanted to go work for him. And I did.

He was everything that came through in that speech and a whole lot more. He was my boss essentially, but he never held that over me. He was like a father to me, and a rebbi and a dear friend. We would speak for hours about everything. He was always engaging and on target. He understood people and understood life. He knew what makes people tick. He could tell the good from the not-so-good and would do his best to cleave to and empower the good.

He would often repeat short witty sayings from his mother, filled with the eternal wisdom of the Jewish people, relating to all aspects of life. With them, he would educate, inspire and guide those with whom he came in contact.

He taught and led by example, inspiring with words and with deeds. He was unfailingly kind and patient, even with people nobody else had patience for and even to people who never appreciated the kindness he extended to them.

He could speak and relate to anyone. He would call me at home almost every day and my young children would answer the phone. He would strike up conversations with them and become their telephone friend. One Sunday, he came to my house. He knocked on the door and the kids shouted, "Who's there?" The voice from the other side of the door said, "Rabbi Fishman."

They were excited to finally meet their telephone friend. But when they opened the door, they said, "You're not Rabbi Fishman. You are so old! Rabbi Fishman is very young and he is our friend."

It took some time for him to convince them that he was the same Rabbi Fishman who was their friend. He was likewise the friend of many other people, some of

whom had many friends and some who had none. He could speak and connect to anyone, young and old, learned or not, great scholars and simple laymen.

He was a study of opposites in a certain way. He was very serious, but had a hysterically funny side to him. He was intensely polite and courteous, but to protect a Torah principle, or to protect a child or a rebbi, he was fearlessly stubborn.

He didn't care about kavod for himself, only for others. He never sought honor and never learned how to handle it. What he cared about was Torah, kavod haTorah, people, and primarily chinuch.

When he would speak of his rebbi, Rav Yitzchok Hutner, he would shed a tear, always, every time. And when he would speak of Jewish children not receiving a Torah education, he would also get choked up.

He was full of emotion for everything holy, because his essence was holiness. And he cared. He really cared. He worked hard, day and night. He didn't give that impression, because he didn't do it to impress anybody. He did it because he cared. He cared about every Jewish child, every morah, every teacher, every rebbi and every menahel, and he worked on their behalf.

He was seemingly always on the phone, working with rabbeim and helping them when there were local problems. He worked with menahalim to improve their schools and smooth things out with baalei batim to get everyone on the same page. If something wasn't going right in a school, any school, and it came to his attention, he got to work to improve the situation.

He cared. He really cared. Every rebbi and every morah, menahel and menaheles was his business and he made time for them, listening, guiding, training, answering questions, and doing whatever he could for them.

When a rebbi or anyone involved in chinuch was retiring and there was an issue with a pension, he dropped everything to make sure that the person who dedicated their life to the highest calling would have what to live on in their senior years. He would do whatever was necessary, cajoling, squeezing, convincing, and, when all else failed, convening a din Torah on behalf of the mechaneich. He didn't just pay lip service and provide a shoulder to cry on. He rolled up his sleeves and did what had to be done.

When a school was functioning well and growing, he would have the most nachas. His face would light up when he spoke about successful schools out of town and the great people involved in running them. He would travel, often across the country, and was as familiar and involved with Jewish communities where there were day schools and community kollelim as far and as varied as Portland, Savannah, South

Bend, Houston, Los Angeles, Toronto and Chicago as he was with his native Williamsburg.

He cared about Jewish children and did what he could to make sure that there was a good school available for them. His rebbi was Rav Hutner, but his boss was Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, who founded Torah Umesorah, and he went to work every day to please his boss and carry out his mission.

He would often recount a conversation that took place between Rav Shraga Feivel and his contemporaries in Williamsburg who were mocking his efforts on behalf of Jewish public school children across America.

With tears streaming down his face, Rav Shea would often recount Mr. Mendlowitz's response: "Un vos art eich oib noch fiftzik toizend kinder velen zogen Shema Yisroel? And what does it bother you if another 50,000 Jewish children will recite Shema Yisroel?"

That became Rabbi Fishman's mantra, and also the mantra of the people who worked for him. He indoctrinated us to do whatever we could to realize that dream of continuing to expand the world of Torah and mitzvos. That mantra still guides those who were privileged enough to fall under his wing. Every once in a while,

when we are together, we recite those holy words with the intonation of Reb Shea and get recharged. We chant, "Un vos art eich oib noch fiftzik toizend kinder velen zogen Shema Yisroel?"

When he spoke at the Torah Umesorah convention on Shabbos in a large room filled with over one thousand mechanchim, everything was suspended, as all eyes were glued to the angelic figure standing on a raised area in the center. He stood there in his kapota, swaying back and forth, turning this way and that, his hands waving, his voice rising. Nobody missed a word.

As he spoke, you could feel his neshomah soaring to the heavens, as lofty, holy words flowed from his mouth. He spoke with an abundance of passion, the crowd hanging on to every word. He soared and everyone soared along with him. He would say a story like nobody else could, telling the most beautiful and uplifting tales that touched you to the core. He had a subtle understanding of Polish and Chabad chassidishe Torah, which he would sprinkle in. His divrei Torah lifted the crowd, holding them there in his palms, inspiring Hashem's soldiers to return to their posts feeling pumped about themselves and their chosen path in life.

When he was done, he was done, wiped out, drenched in sweat, holy sweat, from a job done well, the job of furthering the dream of more and more children across the fruited plain reciting Shema Yisroel.

I would travel with Rabbi Fishman to raise money for Torah Umesorah. Our mission once took us to Detroit. Raising money is a very difficult, grueling and thankless task, but without it, you can't accomplish much.

Our trip was before the days of cell phones. I remember sitting with him in the car as he was driving. We came to a 7-11 store on Ten Mile Road, in the heart of the Jewish neighborhood. He pulled up to the edge of the parking lot and parked. He rolled down his window and took out a bag of change. I said to him, "What are you doing? Why did you stop the car here and what do you plan on doing with that bag of quarters?" He responded, "Welcome to the Detroit office of Torah Umesorah. You see that pay phone out my window? That is our office!"

Indeed, we spent much time at that spot during our stay there, as he popped in quarters and called people, seeking to set up appointments for solicitations. We didn't make much money. The weather was cold and snowy, and most often, we were freezing as we sat in the car with the open window trying to interest people enough in our cause to let us in.

Two visits there stand out in my memory. One was to the legendary Marvin Berlin, who made our trip financially worthwhile – a story for a different time. The other

was a visit to my grandfather, Rav Leizer Levin, the decades-long rov of Detroit. That visit made the trip worthwhile on a spiritual level.

We were invited to eat supper in his home. We were sitting at his small kitchen table, with a bowl of soup in front of us, and Rabbi Fishman asked Rav Levin how it was that he succeeded in the rabbonus for so many years.

Rav Levin was a giant in many ways, and he and Rabbi Fishman saw greatness in each other. When Rabbi Fishman asked him the question, he gave much thought to the answer.

Rav Levin had studied in the yeshiva of the Chofetz Chaim as a bochur for seven years. During that time, he lived in the home of the Chofetz Chaim for more than one year. He rarely spoke about himself, but that night he did.

He said that when he left Radin to go learn in Kelm, the Chofetz Chaim said to him, "Leizer, gei redd mit Yidden. Go speak with Jews."

He said those words with so much heart, love and conviction that he lit a fire in our hearts. What happened the rest of the trip didn't really matter. We would plunk

those quarters into our office phone on Ten Mile Road and we would say to each other, "Mir gei'in redder mit Yidden. We are going to speak with Jews." And whether we got a big check or a small one, it didn't make a difference. We got our feet in the door and we spoke to a Yid about Torah, about Yiddishkeit, and about committing future generations to Torah.

When we arrived back in New York, Rabbi Fishman's parting words to me were, "Now, you aren't to repeat that story until after the convention. You will have to wait until I use it in my speech." And a few months later, at the convention in the Friar Tuck Inn, in his masterful speech, he repeated that story, exhorted the mechanchim "redd mit di talmidim."

You could hear a pin drop as he spoke, one thousand pairs of eyes and ears trained on his passionate words, which emanated from a heart that cared, and bounced off the walls and the low ceiling of that cavernous room into the hearts of the listeners.

The holy words of the Chofetz Chaim expressed the ambition of every rov, rebbi, morah and teacher to connect with their students, understanding what they are about and tapping into their latent enthusiasm for learning.

The crowd was so mesmerized by the message that each attendee went home with an extra bounce in their step and repeated that story again and again. It has since become a classic, because the man who cared most about rabbeim and placed them on a pedestal told it with so much life and emotion that anyone who heard it will never forget it.

Rabbi Fishman was handed the helm of the organization when it was at a low, with few baalei batim and no money. He rebuilt it, painstakingly, finding good people to add to the barebones staff. He came up with new projects. He was full of ideas and wore himself down seeing them through. He brought together a new board, won friends for the organization, and raised the money to keep it going.

To be honest, he was never really able to raise enough to realize his dreams, and never earned much money for himself. Some princely baalei batim such as Reb Sheldon Beren, Reb Dovid Singer and Reb Yankel Rajchenbach rallied to his side, and with their arrival and support, Reb Shea was able to grow the organization in a phenomenal way.

He hired capable bnei Torah in whom he saw talent and a future. He guided and inspired them, helping them to develop into stars as they followed his example of dedicating their lives to committing generations to Torah.

We cannot close without noting that he was a dear and loyal friend to this newspaper from the very lonely beginning and took great pride in its growth and accomplishments.

He would often end his speeches at the conventions with the words "Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu," blessed and worthy of admiration are those who toil in the vineyard of Hashem, spreading, teaching and supporting Torah. He said it in a way that everyone felt it.

And we say: Ashrei! Blessed and worthy of praise are all those who were educated by a mechanech who benefitted from Rabbi Fishman and the organization he headed and set on the path to greatness.

Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu umah yofah yerushoseinu.

Tehei nishmaso tzerurah betzror hachaim.