

## **Gadlus Ha'adam: Rav Boruch Mordechai Ezrachi zt"l**

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Rav Boruch Mordechai Ezrachi zt"l would tell the story of one of the times he went to ask the Brisker Rov a question in learning. He asked his question and the Rov answered and then an acquaintance of the Rov entered the room. Himself a distinguished talmid chochom, he said to the Rov, "Vos redt min duh? What are you discussing here?"

The Rov looked up at him and, with his Brisker directness, said to him, "Min redt nit. Min lernt. We aren't discussing anything. We are learning."

Undaunted, the guest tried again. "Vos lernt min? What are you learning?"

The Rov responded, "Min lernt nit. Min hurevet. We aren't learning. We are deeply immersed in working to understand the sugya."

With that, the conversation ended and the Rov left the room to tend to something.

Rav Boruch Mordechai, who was niftar last week at the age of 94, spent his life hureving - hureving in Torah, hureving in mussar, hureving in teaching Torah and mussar, hureving in bein adam lachaveiro, and hureving in gadlus ha'adam, the mantra of Slabodka.

Rav Eizek Sher was a relic of the pre-war Slabodka Yeshiva. As a son-in-law of the famed Alter of Slabodka and a head of the yeshiva when it was reconstituted and known as "Chevron," the young bochurim who learned there revered him.

Rav Boruch Mordechai recalled that as a young bochur learning in the Chevron Yeshiva, he worked hard to develop a relationship with Rav Eizek. He finally merited a daily session with the mussar great. He would walk Rav Sher home from the yeshiva after davening.

One day, he accompanied Rav Eizek on the walk home, but upon reaching their destination, the rebbi turned to the talmid, shook his head, and said, "Nisht azoi. Not like that." They retraced their route to the yeshiva and then walked back to Rav Sher's home.

Once again, Rav Sher was displeased by something and the two returned to the yeshiva. The young bochur was perplexed. What did Rav Eizek want from him? He mustered up the courage and finally asked.

Reb Eizek straightened his shoulders, stood ramrod straight, and looked the bochur in the eye.

"Azoit geit ah general. This is the way a general walks," he said.

He was instructing young Rav Boruch Mordechai regarding the proper deportment and comportment of a ben Torah.

Rav Boruch Mordechai learned to walk as a general, talk as a general, and always be seen as a general. He learned what he could accomplish, the army he could yet lead, and his responsibility to view himself that way.

And he transferred that concept to thousands of talmidim and to people he would influence with his fiery, heartfelt, impactful drashos throughout the decades.

Slabodka mussar as developed by the Alter and inculcated in the talmidim of the Slabodka Yeshiva and later the Chevron Yeshiva is defined as gadlus ha'adam, appreciating the many gifts Hashem provides to every person and maximizing them.

Slabodka mussar accentuates the positive and builds people up, instead of allowing them to get down, and instead of allowing the vicissitudes of life to sadden and embitter them. Slabodka mussar teaches that every person has the ability to rise above their circumstances and succeed. Every person can be great if they aim high. Rav Ezrachi would tell his talmidim that expending the maximum effort is the minimum that is expected of a ben Torah, and all his life he portrayed that.

Rav Boruch Mordechai wasn't only a disciple of Slabodka mussar. He came to embody it. He embodied gadlus in so many different ways to so many different types of people, from his many talmidim in Chevron and then at Ateres Yisroel to those who came under his spell in his Bnei Torah camps in Eretz Yisroel and Russia and the many who heard his shiurim and drashos at dinners, conventions and gatherings around the world.

As befitting someone who appreciated gadlus ha'adam, Rav Boruch Mordechai's kapoteh and hat always fit perfectly and looked brand new; his shoes were always polished. To him there was nobody more choshuv, more important than a ben Torah, a ben yeshiva, a rosh yeshiva, and in his comportment and dress he portrayed that.

The Ezrachi family lived near Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv. When Rav Boruch Mordechai was a toddler, as his mother fed him in his highchair, she would say, "Boruch Mordechai, du zolst oisvakken ah masmid azoi vi der zun for der Holmer Rov. May you grow up to be a masmid like the son of the Holmer Rov [Rav Elyashiv]." With such a chinuch from such a young age, it is no wonder that he grew to be a world-famous masmid and talmid chochom.

As a young child, his great intelligence was recognized. The family, like most Yerushalmi families in those days, was very poor. Following his bar mitzvah drasha, one of the family friends approached Rebbetzin Ezrachi, whose husband was sick in the hospital, with an idea. "I noticed from the way your son said his p'shetel," the person said, "that he is brilliant. Perhaps you should send him out to work. I'm sure that with his great abilities he will be able to provide for the family."

Rav Boruch Mordechai's mother wouldn't hear of it. She shot back, "I'd rather go to work washing people's floors in Rechavia than send my precious son to work. He will grow up to be a talmid chochom and nothing else."

His mother's tefillos and bakashos were answered, and the family's mesirus nefesh was rewarded, with Boruch Mordechai growing to become a masmid and a talmid chochom and a great rosh yeshiva and gadol.

I knew him for over forty years. My father-in-law, Rav Dovid Svei, would daven in Rav Boruch Mordechai's yeshiva every Shabbos morning, and as a good son-in-law, I would join him. When I got engaged, I was an American bochur learning in Yeshivas Brisk and had never heard of Rav Ezrachi. But the first time I entered the yeshiva, he enthusiastically welcomed me with a broad smile and a warm greeting as if I was a long-lost family member returning home. I immediately fell under his spell.

Every Shabbos morning, following davening, there was a Kiddush. Long tables would be set up, and all the bochurim would sit down, along with the neighborhood notables who davened in the yeshiva. People such as my father-in-law, as well as Rav Yitzchok Peretz, later to become the head of Shas, Rav Avrohom Ravitz, who later headed Degel HaTorah, Rav Yosef Segal, a local rosh yeshiva, and Reb Aryeh Golovenchick, a well-known local askan, would sit around the rosh yeshiva, Rav Boruch Mordechai, who would deliver a stirring drasha on the parsha.

As he spoke, everyone sat spellbound, entranced by his delivery and brilliant analysis of a facet of the parsha.

Everyone received a slice of Yerushalmi kugel and a pickle. The kugel was really good, the best Yerushalmi kugel I ever had. But it didn't come close to the pearls that would stream from the rosh yeshiva as he spoke.

Rav Ezrachi was a m'dabrana d'umsa, a gifted orator, and when the public needed him, when there was a message that had to be delivered in a way that people would listen and understand, Rav Boruch Mordechai would close his Gemara and travel to wherever it was necessary to deliver the daas Torah berurah. He always raised the crowd, never letting anyone down. He always delivered.

He delivered a variety of shiurim every week on diverse sugyos and diverse mesechtos, including on the mesechta the yeshiva was learning, a shiur on kodshim for bochurim and yungeleit from different yeshivos and a shiur based on a halacha mentioned in the parshas hashavua. Each shiur was a masterpiece, delivered by a master.

The shiurim were so much a part of his essence that according to his daughter, one time when he was under anesthesia during an operation, he began to deliver a shiur. In his state of unconscious, he delivered an entire shiur, with the same bombast as if he were awake and there a hundred bochurim sitting in front of him.

He spent his life learning, by himself and with others, raising himself and raising talmidim. He influenced many thousands of people, highlighting the beauty of Torah and those who study and follow it. Day and night, he had few interests other than learning and teaching Torah, and writing seforim to disseminate it further. As his reputation grew, so did his yeshiva, which was located in Bayit Vegan in Yerushalayim. A few years ago, it finally moved to its own building in Modiin Illit. Rav Boruch Mordechai became a leading Torah personality and was a senior member of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah at his passing.

The last public picture of Rav Ezrachi was taken following his weekly Thursday night shiur. One of his talmidim, Rav Yechiel Sever, is seen speaking to him. I asked Rav Sever about the picture. He told me that it was taken at 1 AM, when the shiur ended. Rav Boruch Mordechai had difficulty speaking, as he was delivering the shiur despite breathing difficulties and general weakness. But when you look at the picture, his face is bright and illuminated and he has a broad smile as he reviews a point of the shiur with his talmid.

What a way to remember him! That was his life: Torah. Only Torah. Hasmodah in Torah, speaking Torah and hureving in Torah, just as the Brisker Rov had portrayed to him.

I asked Rav Sever what the topic of the last shiur was. He said, "He was discussing Rav Chaim Volozhiner and who is greater, man or malach. A malach does not have a yeitzer hora. When Hashem tells him to do something, he does it without hesitating. But man has a yeitzer hora, which he must overcome. The yeitzer hora tries to hold him back from fulfilling the will of Hashem, and when man beats back his yeitzer and acts

according to the wishes of Hashem, he attains a great reward and becomes yet greater than he was previously.”

A malach is on a higher level, but man has the ability to raise himself, while a malach remains static, never able to be greater than he was when Hashem created him.

How poetic that after delivering thousands of shiurim and publishing over a dozen seforim, the last shiur he would deliver would be an appropriate epitaph on himself, leading a life of constantly rising, constantly growing, and constantly benefitting others with his greatness.

With his final breaths, he delivered his weekly Kodshim shiur, slowly breathing, inhaling oxygen and exhaling Torah, one labored breath after the next. And he finished the shiur, with his strength ebbing, he insisted on saying a devar mussar as he did every week. He repeated a thought from Rav Chaim Volozhiner, whose sefer Nefesh Hachaim was a guide to him in life and on which he said shiurim twice a week.

It was literally with his final strength and his final breaths that he exhorted his talmidim to always recognize their strengths and always seek to overcome obstacles and grow. On Shabbos, he was taken to the hospital, never to return to his home, to his yeshiva, or to his talmidim again.

There was no finer exemplar of gadlus ha'adam in our day, and alas, now, he, too, is gone.

Many of us knew him through his shiurim, shmuessen and chizuk missions, each one a classic, every one a gem. Some of us merited to speak with him and bask in his glow of greatness and warmth. Others were blessed to support him and his yeshiva.

May the memory of his life, his Torah, and his mussar and teachings be a zechus to all.