

A Rising Light Extinguished

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The first parsha of the Torah, which discusses the creation of the world and its beginning years, represents potential and the future. On Shabbos Bereishis, we begin the weekly cycle of Torah study—a new beginning, brimming with promise for the coming year.

Yet, almost as soon as Shabbos Bereishis ended this year, we began receiving messages, urging tefillos for Rav Shlomo Halioua, the beloved rosh yeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin. The initial requests were marked by a frantic urgency, yet no one knew what had struck him down so suddenly. There was mention of an infection, but nothing more. Within hours, however, the tone shifted. The words became more grave. Rav Shlomo, they said, was in critical need of rachamei Shomayim. He was in the ICU, battling a severe infection.

And then, before we even had time to grasp the magnitude of his illness, he was gone. A young rosh yeshiva, a scion of families rooted in Torah greatness, his presence embodied the grandeur and dignity of the yeshiva he led, Chaim Berlin, a legacy founded by Rav Yitzchok Hutner and carried forward with unwavering dedication by Rav Aharon Schechter.

Rav Shlomo Halioua represented this legacy not only through his knowledge and character, but through the warmth and gadlus that permeated his very being.

Though his tenure at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin was brief, his influence was immediate and profound. His talmidim were drawn to his insightful shiurim and his meticulously crafted maamorim, treasures of Torah wisdom that resonated deeply with each listener.

Rav Shlomo was a quiet and humble masmid, a tremendous talmid chochom whose every word and action displayed an inherent nobility. Those who knew him saw not just a rosh yeshiva, but a leader in the making, a potential rebbi to thousands, poised to leave an indelible mark on the Torah world.

Yet, just as he stood at the threshold of greatness, the middas hadin struck with unyielding force, leaving us devastated and bewildered by the sudden loss of yet another gadol b'Yisroel. Woe is to us. "Shekulah misas tzaddikim k'sereifas Bais Elokeinu."

It is not for us to know the Divine plan, but we must heed the messages that Hakadosh Boruch Hu sends us. We must commit ourselves, each in our own way, to a life of increased Torah learning, mitzvos, and achdus. Now, more than ever, as we endure the chevlei Moshiach, as we commit to deeper study of Torah, we must anchor ourselves in the mitzvos that will hasten our redemption—teshuvah and achdus—so that the suffering of our people will come to an end and the Bais Elokeinu will be rebuilt.

When Rav Aharon Schechter, rosh yeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, was niftar, I felt compelled to share the profound and enduring connection that I feel for that extraordinary

yeshiva. It holds a unique place in my heart. As a young yeshiva bochur, an esteemed mispallel in my father's shul, a person I had come to greatly respect, invited me to attend a maamar delivered by his rebbi, Rav Yitzchok Hutner, on Chol Hamoed Sukkos.

At the time, I was just a young boy from Monsey who had barely set foot in Brooklyn, and though I had heard of Rav Hutner's greatness, I had never experienced it firsthand. Yet, thanks to the encouragement of his talmid, Reb Matis Greenblatt, I decided to attend the maamar. I didn't know what to expect, and yet it surpassed anything I could have imagined. The experience was nothing short of transformative. The maamar, and every detail surrounding it, captured my mind and heart. The Torah that Rav Hutner imparted was like nothing I had encountered before—profound, poetic, and alive with meaning. His voice was soft yet vibrant, painting concepts with a clarity and beauty that caused the Torah to dance in my mind long after his words had ceased.

The scene itself was unforgettable. Rav Hutner sat regally at the head of the table, surrounded by senior talmidim, each one transfixed by the richness of his words. The entire setting exuded a reverence and awe that matched the gravity of the Torah being shared. I was spellbound, utterly captivated by the majesty of it all.

Years have passed since that day, yet the memory remains vivid, as does the deep impact it had on me. I was privileged to attend more maamorim with Reb Matis, and although I never had the honor of a personal conversation with Rav Hutner, his teachings opened my heart to the world of Maharal and machshovah, and he earned a permanent place in my heart alongside his yeshiva.

Later, when I became involved with Torah Umesorah, I was drawn back to that hallowed bais medrash, where Rav Aharon Schechter had already established himself as a leader among roshei yeshiva. Rav Aharon played a pivotal role in communal leadership, giving of himself to organizations like Torah Umesorah, where he was closely connected to Rav Shea Fishman. It was through Rav Shea, who had studied under Rav Hutner and was intimately familiar with his teachings, that I was introduced to Rav Aharon.

Rav Aharon welcomed me with kindness and generosity, drawing me close with a warmth that was both aristocratic and deeply human. He represented the highest ideals of gadlus ha'adam, of a talmid chochom conducting himself with inherent dignity. There was a unique quality to the way he spoke with people. Everyone felt special, honored to be in his presence. Every encounter with him was elevating, and I was always touched by the profound respect that he showed for each person he met.

For several years, I had the privilege of sitting with Rav Aharon at the Torah Umesorah convention, sharing Shabbos seudos in his private dining room. Those moments were treasures, as Rav Aharon, enveloped in the kedushas haShabbos, led the seudah with a sanctity and joy that filled the room. The zemiros, the divrei Torah, and his insights into the parsha were delivered with a passion that was unmatched, and I felt honored to be included

among his close family and talmidim. Though I was technically an outsider, he welcomed me in, making me feel like family.

Once, someone approached him and asked why he had allowed me into his private circle, as I was not technically a talmid. With his signature warmth, Rav Aharon replied that he considered me “an honorary talmid.” It was a comment that touched me deeply, one of many moments in which he extended himself with kindness and grace.

On one memorable occasion, during my first visit to Camp Morris, I went to greet Rav Aharon and casually mentioned that it was my first time there. Without hesitation, he offered to give me a tour of the camp himself. He climbed into my car, and with the pride of one introducing a friend to his home, he directed me around the campus, pointing out each building and landmark. His love for the yeshiva was palpable, and I felt privileged to see it through his eyes.

The rosh yeshiva attended several of my family’s simchos, including my children’s weddings and a vort in Brooklyn. Each time, his presence was a cherished honor, a testament to the bond between us. In Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, once a talmid, always a talmid, and the roshei yeshiva were steadfast in their devotion to their talmidim. Rav Hutner and later Rav Aharon were involved not only in their talmidim’s Torah growth, but in guiding them through life’s complexities. Each talmid was set on a unique path, tailored to their individual strengths and aspirations, with the rosh yeshiva’s unwavering guidance helping them find success both in Torah and in life.

The Chaim Berlin roshei yeshiva had “breiteh pleitzes” and were prime leaders, accepting responsibility and working for the klal, through organizations and by helping and supporting individual communal leaders, rabbonim, roshei yeshiva, askonim, and regular good Jews. In his short time at the head of the yeshiva, Rav Shlomo Halioua followed their tradition in communal affairs as well.

Even in his youth, Rav Shlomo’s qualities shone brightly. As a young bochur in Yeshiva of Brooklyn, Rav Shlomo was marked by a chashivus that set him apart, a quiet dedication that became his hallmark. Known among his peers as a baal middos and masmid, his commitment to learning was unwavering. Together with the recently departed tzaddik Rav Velvel Finkelstein, he achieved national recognition by winning the first National Pirchei Hasmodah Contest, an honor that reflected not only his natural brilliance but his tireless dedication to Torah.

Rav Shlomo hailed from an aristocratic family, a lineage of rabbonim and marbitzei Torah that had nurtured Torah in Morocco for generations. This noble heritage traced back to Rabbeinu Bachya Ben Asher, an illustrious forebear whose Torah insights continue to enlighten minds centuries later. Cognizant of his legacy, Rav Shlomo carried the responsibility and reverence for Torah that had been passed down through the ages. From his earliest years, he knew that every moment he invested in learning brought him closer to Hakadosh Boruch Hu. His limud haTorah was not just study. It was an act of weighty avodah, through which he reached greater spiritual heights.

Throughout his formative years, Rav Shlomo had the extraordinary privilege of learning under some of the era's most towering figures. His learning under Rav Binyomin Peler, Rav Feivel Cohen, Rav Avrohom Yehoshua Soloveitchik, and, of course, Rav Yonason David and Rav Aharon Schechter established a strong foundation, both in hasmodah and in the clarity of thought that would come to define him. Each rebbi instilled in him values that would become intrinsic to his character—iyun in Torah, rigor in his avodah, and a humility that was ever-present.

As his reputation grew, so did his stature among his peers, who recognized in him not just a masmid, but a tremendous lamdan and person of depth.

A person who thinks everything through very carefully grows in Torah and succeeds. A person who spends hours deep in thought, working through the intricacies of a sugya, becomes a lamdan. Rav Shlomo spent hours poring over the intricacies of each sugya, never satisfied until he arrived at a conclusion that was both profound and rooted in truth. This amkus was his natural inclination, an extension of his deep ahavas haTorah.

As an ish tzonua, he was careful not only with his thoughts, but with his words, thinking through each question posed to him before offering a response. He carried himself with a quiet dignity, never seeking the limelight, but consistently earning the respect and admiration of those around him. It was this humility that marked him as a gadol baTorah—a person who understood that true greatness is found in service to Torah, in refining oneself to be a vessel for Torah. He attempted to hide his greatness in Torah, but in the yeshiva all knew that he encompassed the many facets of gadlus.

Rav Shlomo's life was a constant process of growth, of horeiving over Torah and avodah, reaching new depths of understanding with each passing day. Through his relentless dedication, he not only became a man of wide-ranging Torah knowledge, but also succeeded in every facet of his life. This ascent was not a matter of ambition. It was a natural result of his avodah, an unending journey toward ever-greater heights in Torah, middos, and closeness to Hakadosh Boruch Hu.

He continued along the path hewed by the previous roshei yeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, studying and teaching the sugyos of Shas, as well as the seforim of the Maharal, the Ramchal, and the Vilna Gaon, to reach a lofty understanding of Torah, mitzvos, and all of creation.

Therefore, the promise of the Torah was realized in him, and he succeeded in his role as rosh yeshiva of a foremost yeshiva, taking over from his legendary rebbi and father-in-law, who followed in the path paved by his own rebbi, Rav Hutner, leading the yeshiva and its talmidim to grow and succeed in their unique, glorious path in Torah.

May his memory, the example he set, the Torah he studied and taught, and what he stood for be a zechus for his wife, children, grandchildren, talmidim, and all of Klal Yisroel.