

Reflections on The Fourth Yartzeit of Rabbi Azriel C. Goldfein, z"l

Parshas Vayishlach - 14 Kislev 5772 / 10 December 2011

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Background to who he was and where he was from

Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein, z"l, the Rosh HaYeshiva of the Yeshiva Gedolah of Johannesburg, was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 5 Dec 1935 (9 Kislev 5695) to Anne and Ben Goldfein, a"h, and he died in Johannesburg, South Africa, on the Shabbos just after his Hebrew birthday – on Shabbos Parshas Vayishlach, 24 Nov 2007 / 14 Kislev 5768 at the age, according to his Hebrew birthday, of 72 and, according to his secular birthday, of 71. It is considered auspicious for a person to die so closely to his birthday and on Shabbos¹. At the time of his passing, much of Johannesburg – with the distinct exception of the suburb of Observatory, where the Yeshiva Gedolah is located – was literally pummelled with golf-ball size hail stones that actually shattered windows and left permanent pock marks on cars. We were later informed by those family members who had been present at the hospital at the time that he passed, that even the nurses commented on the simultaneous occurrence of the passing of the Rosh Yeshiva and the severe thunderstorm, saying that *"the angels were crying over the passing of this great man."*

It was in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that the Rosh Yeshiva met a young Rabbi by the name of Chaim Tzvi Hollander. Rabbi Hollander was part of a group from Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, who had come to assist the Torah Academy of Minneapolis – the school founded by the Rosh Yeshiva's father, Ben – during a time of great financial crisis. It was at the urging of Rabbi Hollander that the Rosh Yeshiva eventually went to Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland after

graduating from high school. His first chavrusa at Telshe was with the legendary Rabbi Ben Tzion Isaacson, he should live and be well, affectionately known in those parts as *"the Afrikaner"*. Although the Rosh Yeshiva's beginnings at Telshe were humble – having to start out by sitting in on classes with significantly younger students, he would eventually rise to the level of having a chavrusa (a personal one-on-one study session) with one of the heads of the Yeshiva, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, z"l, with whom he maintained a close personal relationship until Rav Gifter's passing in 2001.

While at Telshe, the Rosh Yeshiva became famous for his diligence in learning Torah. Someone once told me that the Rosh Yeshiva would stay up until one or two in the morning every night when he was at Telshe - and that on Thursday nights, the night that bochorim would traditionally learn a bit later, the Rosh Yeshiva would stay up all night. To be clear – he

did not stay up late each night – or all night – only to sleep in the next day. He continued the next day as though he had had a proper sleep. Such was his dedication to learning that I once heard from someone² in America in the name of Rav Gifter that *"when the other masmidim (diligent students) at Telshe were finishing their learning – that was when Rav Azriel was just getting started!"*

Noa and I once visited her cousins, Rabbi Yisroel and Chani Goldfein, who live in Detroit. Rabbi Yisroel attended Telshe for many years and told us that he had seen many of the semicha (Rabbinic ordination) certificates for the musmachim (the graduates) of Telshe, but that the Rosh Yeshiva's was the only one on which he had ever seen printed the following:

*"He constantly excelled in his studies and in his extraordinary diligence. He toiled and labored extensively in Torah and in Wisdom, using his nights as he used his days, so that the Holy Texts did not cease to be heard from his lips, until he had risen to momentous heights in the understanding of the Torah. He is indeed a master of the Talmud and a creator of Torah novellae comparable to our great Talmudic authorities"*³



*Chanukas HaBayis at the new campus for Telshe Cleveland. (1957)
From Left to Right: Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz, Rabbi Aharon Kotler,
Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, Rabbi Avraham Tanzer,
Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein.*

The Rosh Yeshiva spent close to a decade in Telshe, during which time he and the Rebbetzin, she should live and be well, met at a sheva brachos for their mutual friends and shortly thereafter were married. When he left Telshe, the Rosh Yeshiva was given semicha – both yoreh yoreh and yadin yadin – personally from Rabbi Chaim

Mordechai Katz, z"l, affectionately known as Rav Motel. To be clear – yoreh yoreh is the normal semicha that applies to someone with the title Rabbi; yadin yadin is a higher level of semicha that is given to Dayanim (Judges) – those who are qualified to sit on a Beis Din. He also received semicha (yoreh yoreh) at that time from Rav Gifter and later received another semicha (yoreh yoreh and yadin yadin) from Rabbi Menachem Tzvi Eichenstein, z"l – the Chief Rabbi of St. Louis.

The Rosh Yeshiva's first Rabbinic position was in a small community in New Jersey. From there he went on to become a teacher at the Jewish day school in St. Louis, Missouri, and later the Associate Rosh Yeshiva of the yeshiva that was there. In 1972, at the request of Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, he should live

¹ According to the Ari, z"l, one who dies on Shabbos does so free of sin.

² Rabbi (Dayan) Shmuel Fuerst, Chicago, Illinois (to whom is attributed another story later and at which time his name and background are discussed).

³ Translated excerpt from the semicha given by Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz (4 Elul 5722, 3 September 1962).

and be well, the Rosh Yeshivah came with his family - 6 children and his Rebbetzin pregnant with the 7th (my wife Noa) - to start a post-high school beis medrash program at Yeshiva College. For a variety of reasons, things did not work out with that program and the Rosh Yeshivah, with the boundless support and encouragement of his Rebbetzin, went on to start in 1978 – at tremendous personal sacrifice – the Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg. He began with two students: (1) Rabbi Yossi Hollander – the son of Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander, who so many years before had encouraged the Rosh Yeshivah to go to Telshe – and (2) Rabbi Ron Hendler, who today serves as the Registrar of Conversions for the Beth Din and the Rabbi of the Har Hashem Shul in Glenhazel, and has previously served as the Assistant to the Chief Rabbi. Although the Rosh Yeshivah began the Yeshivah Gedolah with only two students, he conducted the yeshivah no differently than if it had been filled with hundreds of students. The quality, seriousness, and level of the program, as well as the amount of preparation and planning behind it, were on par with any top notch yeshivah in the world.

To this day, the Rosh Yeshivah remains the only person to have successfully created a Yeshivah Gedolah in South Africa!

Counted among his talmidim are no less than the Chief Rabbi himself, Rabbi Dr. Warren Goldstein, Rabbi Ron Hendler, Rabbi Matthew Liebenberg, Rabbi Bryan Opert, Rabbi Craig Kacev, Rabbi Tuvia Sifris, Rabbi Anthony Gerson, Rabbi Ari Hoppenstein, Rabbi Ilan Ra'anan, Rabbi Gabi Bookatz, Rabbi Barak Bar-Chaim, Rabbi Mendel Rabinowitz, Rabbi Graham Finkelstein, a"h, Rabbi Steven Krawitz, Rabbi Stephen Jawitz, Rabbi Anton Klein, Rabbi Hillel Bernstein, Durban's own Rabbi Sam Thurgood, Rabbi Danny Saksenberg, Rabbi Yochanon Ziegler, Rabbi Akiva Furman, the Rosh Yeshivah's own sons, Rabbi Avi, Rabbi David, Rabbi Moshe, and Rabbi Aron, and the list goes on and on. All of the members of the Durban Kollel learned for significant periods of time at the Yeshivah Gedolah. It is impossible to overestimate the impact that the Rosh Yeshivah and the Yeshivah Gedolah have had on South Africa; and it would, likewise, be impossible to imagine a South African Jewish community devoid of the Rosh Yeshivah's influence!

So how does one merit a Rosh Yeshivah?

I like to consider in what merit a person accomplishes what he accomplishes. So what does a person do to merit having a Rosh Yeshivah for a son? (And I'll increase the complexity of the question – as the Rosh Yeshivah was, in fact, one of three very learned brothers – his older brother Rabbi Ya'akov Shimon, z"l, spent many years as a Rebbe, teaching at a day school in Memphis, Tennessee, and his younger brother, Reb Shevach, he should live and be well, spends many hours a day learning, as well as tutoring students.)

The answer I think can be seen in some excerpts from an obituary that the Rosh Yeshivah wrote about his own father,

Ben Goldfein, a"h, in which he recounts some stories regarding the qualities that his father exemplified. We see first-hand the man who served as the primary role model for the Rosh Yeshivah and what made him so special in the eyes of his son:

Education:

"As the first streaks of dawn appear, a light is still burning in the office of the local day school. It is Thursday night, when Ben Goldfein organizes the school's finances and bookwork. Looking at his watch, he realizes it is later than usual. He goes directly to shul and from there to his own office. A stormy meeting is in session. The Torah Academy of Minneapolis is threatened with closure and a resolution gathering momentum is proposed. The school would continue only for those willing to pay full tuition fees. A quiet authoritative voice is heard. "I am not interested in giving my life for a private school. We have a responsibility to every Jewish child in the community, regardless of financial capability." The motion is blocked."

A Jewish education is for EVERY Jewish child – not just those who can afford it or for those whose parents choose to pay for it.



Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander with Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein. (2007)

Tzedakah:

"I once asked my father why he did not purchase a car, instead of doing his many personal and communal rounds by bus and foot. [RS: Keep in mind that the Goldfeins lived in Minneapolis – one of the coldest places in the United States – where snow is measured by the foot, not the inch!] At that time, several local Rabbonim received telegrams from the late Gaon, Rav Aaron Kotler, zt"l, urgently requesting funds for his yeshivah. "Why should I buy a car when I can use those funds to help Rav Aaron and other Roshei Yeshivah," was his reply. The giving of Tzedakah did not mean maintaining one's standard of living and giving from one's excess. It meant curtailing one's own needs to help others meet theirs."

I am humbled every time I read this. It is a level of tzedakah that is simply remarkable.

Love for Torah:

"In those early years, when Torah was rejected by the huge masses of American Jews, my father's only desire was that it should become part of his family. His greatest source of pride was when all of his three sons went on to Yeshivah Gedolah. When I received my semicha [Rabbinic Ordination] from Telshe Yeshivah, my father had it Photostatted and translated. For years he always carried it with him. No acquaintance, traveller or colleague at Bell Telephone Co. [where Ben Goldfein worked for much of his life] escaped the task of carefully examining it. When my older brother and I entered into the active Torah fields – Harbotzes Torah [teaching and disseminating Torah] – something that most American parents do not look forward

to because of the enormous difficulties -- my father was elated. His only complaint was when we gave up a Torah battle too hastily. Throughout all [his] battles for Torah, my father never carried personal grudges or became embittered. He judged each man favourably and never made enemies. Nor would he attack his opponents personally or speak Lashon Harah about them. He was the first to pursue peace and the first to forgive."

Integrity, Honor And Kiddush Hashem:

"In his own dealings or those of the [Torah] Academy or of Bell Telephone Company [where he was employed] – vis-a-vis other Jews, non-Jews or [the] government – there were no grey areas. Everything was in strict accordance to Torah Law or the law of the land – whether involving thousands of dollars or one cent. On many an occasion, the patience of colleagues wore thin, owing to my father's refusal to cooperate on a certain transaction because of a minor infringement of the law. It was the Jew's responsibility to be beyond reproach, honourable and to sanctify Hashem's name."

Our time with the Rosh Yeshivah

When we first arrived in South Africa nearly six years ago, we were privileged to live with the Rosh Yeshivah and Rebbetzin for six months – as our flat was not yet ready for us to move into – and we were blessed with spending a full cycle of the Yomim Tovim (the Shalosh Regalim – Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot) together. Less than a month after we moved out, the Rosh Yeshivah suffered the massive heart attack which would eventually lead to his passing just over a year later.



Rabbi Nissan Aaron Tucazinsky with Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein. (2006)

While living in their home, we had the honour of spending many nights sharing dinner with the Rosh Yeshivah and Rebbetzin.

Loshon Harah

I remember at the shloshim for the Rosh Yeshivah that Rabbi David Lapin said that the Rosh Yeshivah was "The Mesilus Yesharim" – in other words, he embodied the "path of the just". I can likewise personally attest to this. You see a person best when you get up close to him; when you live with him; when you spend every waking hour with him. The Rosh Yeshivah did not talk about people. He did not bear tales about others. He did not speak ill of others. He did not disparage others. The only people he talked about were the great people that he was privileged to have met in his life and the things that he had learned from them. He was steeped in Torah, but at the same time aware of what was happening in the world – of the latest ideas in science and other areas of study. His Shabbos table was unlike any other that I have ever had the privilege to enjoy – a Shabbos meal would not pass without the Rosh Yeshivah learning something directly from a sefer and discussing it at the table. The precursor to this was usually a discussion about a book, an article, or a letter that he or someone else at the table had read – often times excerpts would be read aloud.

I remember once during one of the holidays from the Yeshivah – I davened at another shul in Johannesburg. At the sit-down bracha, the Rabbi of the shul gave a drasha followed by a discussion in which he highlighted a recent community scandal and tried to offer his advice on how to deal with the significant fallout that had resulted. Although he did not get into specifics, it was obvious that everyone in the room knew precisely what he was speaking about. Everyone that is – except for me. I had to turn to my friend who was seated next to me and whisper in his ear, "What is he talking about?" as I had no clue as to what he was referring. I later learned that that scandal had not only been going on for several weeks - but it had even made the secular newspapers! Did the Rosh Yeshivah know about it? Since he was a significant community leader, I can almost guarantee that it had been brought to his attention and that he was almost certainly consulted regarding how to handle it. But that was the end of it – there was never – NEVER – any discussion about the matter.

Eating:

The Rosh Yeshivah's approach to eating was simply fascinating. In a world of fast food – of people eating entire meals in their cars or even standing up – where it has become acceptable for people to drink from bottles and cans – the Rosh Yeshivah did

not know from fast food. He ate two meals per day. At each of them, he washed on bread⁴ and sat down at a set table. The Rosh Yeshivah saw the eating of a meal as part of his avodah (his service) to Hashem. Just as was the case with physical exercise, eating was a means of caring for his body in order that he could properly serve his Creator. It was a mitzvah and, as is the case with any mitzvah, a person must be careful and thoughtful about the mitzvos that he does.

And the thought of eating a meal without washing and making hamotzi was anathema – pass up an opportunity to say the only bracha that we are commanded by Hashem to make? Never. And he would frequently sing the benching – you see singing too was part of the avodah – part of the service of G-d. He was extremely busy. Time was precious. But meals were never rushed – they were eaten in a leisurely manner.

When bochurim at the yeshivah would inquire from the Rosh Yeshivah regarding his advice for how they could work on themselves – he would suggest that they begin with their relationship with food – to practice exercising self-control in the face of their most basic appetites and desires. Instead of eating two donuts, eat one. Instead of eating this, eat that. This was the start of self-control, self-mastery, and discipline.

Pace and logic:

The Rosh Yeshivah had his own tempo from which he did not deviate. You could not pressure the man - he would listen to your question or your concerns, but he would often not answer

⁴ The Rosh Yeshivah did not hold for mezonos bread.

straight away. And when he did answer – his answer was not set in stone. He was the most eminently reasonable person that I have ever known in my life. If you could show him why you saw things differently, where another argument should be considered, where a different approach might be more suited, he was capable of listening and, even more remarkably, changing his mind! He was not invested in his own opinion – he was invested in the truth and the truth alone. He had no ego.

Exteriors:

The Rosh Yeshivah had a certain style of dress – which differed radically from his contemporaries in the Torah world. Having left America in the early 70's, he was not present when dramatic change swept through the yeshivah world and people went from wearing colours to exclusively wearing black and white (or 'the uniform' as it is so often referred to). The Rosh Yeshivah was from the talmidim of Rabbi Eliyahu Meir Bloch, z"l, the Telshe Rosh Yeshivah who had been fundraising in America when the original Telshe in Lithuania had been destroyed by the Nazis, yemach shemom v'zichrom, and who had re-founded the yeshivah in Cleveland, Ohio. Rav Elya Meir taught his talmidim to dress smart: fashionable and business-like. It was the way of the Lithuanian yeshivos to emphasize that a person who represented Torah had to be impeccable – both in his character traits and in his dress. This exact sentiment is taught by our Sages⁵ – a Talmid Chacham should not dress in a wealthy manner – nor should he dress in a poor manner. He must dress in an average manner and must take great care that he should never have any stains on his clothes.

I was once with Noa at her cousins in Chicago and we were looking through a stack of Mishpacha magazines that they had. On the cover of one of them was Rabbi Ronnie Greenwald, he should live and be well, who is an amazing person in his own right – Google him. Rabbi Greenwald was the spitting image of the Rosh Yeshivah – no beard, stylish dress, coloured shirt – and I commented to Noa how he was dressed so similarly to her father. Sure enough, when I opened the article, it noted that Rabbi Greenwald was a talmid of Rav Eliyahu Meir Bloch!

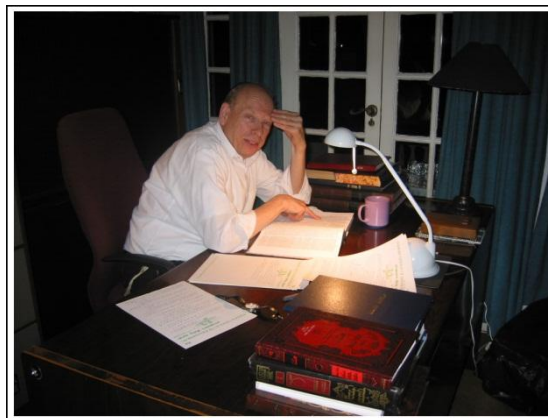
His Humility:

The Rosh Yeshivah had tremendous humility. He enjoyed being mistaken for a businessman – which he often was due to his dress and the fact that he did not have a beard. To truly appreciate his humility, however, we must first appreciate his greatness.

When I was visiting my parents last year, I had a shailah (a question) – so I contacted Rabbi Shmuel Fuerst, he should live and be well, who in addition to being a Rabbi is also a Dayan, as well as one of the foremost talmidim of Rabbi Moshe

Feinstein, z"l, the pre-eminent halachic authority of the last generation. Rabbi Fuerst is considered to be one of the leading halachic authorities in America. The conversation quickly turned to South Africa and Rabbi Fuerst informed me that he was related through marriage to Rabbi Auerbach of Ohr Somayach in Johannesburg. I then asked if he had ever heard of or had any contact with the Rosh Yeshivah. His face lit up. Although I had known Rabbi Fuerst for many years, I did not realize that, prior to studying under Reb Moshe in New York, he had studied at Telshe in Cleveland. Rabbi Fuerst said that the Rosh Yeshivah was THE BEST that Telshe Cleveland had ever produced – and he proceeded to tell over stories praising the Rosh Yeshivah's dedication in learning.⁶

It was a tradition at the Yeshivah Gedolah for all of the talmidim and former talmidim to come to the Goldfeins each year just as Purim was ending. At the last such gathering where the Rosh Yeshivah was present, Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, he should live and be well, the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshiva College in Johannesburg, told over a story that he noted he had been saving for a couple of years and for just such an occasion. Rabbi Tanzer had been in the Catskills (New York), when someone had told him the following story:



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein learning in his study. (2004)

Rav Gifter had been speaking publicly somewhere and was discussing the "Va'ad Harbatzas Torah" that once existed at Telshe in Cleveland, Ohio. The Va'ad was an organization that Telshe had founded in order to help assist with building the Jewish day school system across America. [As noted previously, the Va'ad would send older students and young Rabbis from Telshe to assist with teaching at these schools. It was one of the Rabbis who had been sent by Telshe via this program, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander, who was responsible for convincing the Rosh Yeshivah to go

to Telshe following his graduation from high school, rather than to university, where the Rosh Yeshivah had intended on studying medicine.] Rav Gifter said: "What a great idea we had with the Va'ad! What a wonderful idea! If it wouldn't have been for the Va'ad, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander would not have gone to Minneapolis and Rabbi Azriel Goldfein would not have come to Telshe – and what a loss for K'lal Yisroel (for the Jewish people) that would have been!"

If you have ever come across someone of such calibre – be it a doctor, or a lawyer, etc. – then you know the ego that generally comes along with such a person and with such tremendous accomplishment. In Torah, however, greatness and ego are polar opposites.

When people would ask the Rosh Yeshivah what he did for a living - he would answer that he was a teacher! He failed to mention that he had founded and continued to run an institution on a post-university level – an institution that

⁵ Mishna Berurah (Hilchos Hanhagos Adam Baboker – Siman Beis – citing the Rambam).

⁶ Including the story previously noted.

produces students and graduates whose level of scholarship is recognized internationally. How many stories are told of talmidim that later went to other yeshivas throughout the world only to be asked: Where did you study previously? As the questioners were desperate to know where these talmidim had developed such a strong and solid foundation in Torah learning.

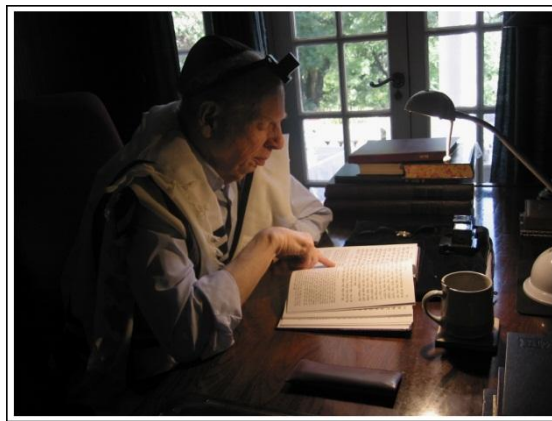
The Rosh Yeshivah once attended a wedding. He went to take his assigned seat at a certain table, at which point someone came over to him and pointed out that that particular table had been reserved for the Rabbis. Understanding that the person was trying to tell him that he must not sit at that table, the Rosh Yeshivah thanked the person, got up, and walked away. When he later saw that the other Rabbis had sat down at the table, he made his way back and took the seat that was meant to be for him.

Another time, the Rosh Yeshivah was standing somewhere when a couple of Orthodox Jewish men with hats and beards were being escorted through a particular area – a lobby, whatever it was – when he was physically pushed aside and told, “Make way for the Rabbis!” (These men were not Rabbis.)

Humility in learning:

Humility was a quality that the Rosh Yeshivah shared with his Rebbe, Rav Gifter, and which was emphasized in his approach to learning Torah. In his hesped for Rav Gifter, the Rosh Yeshivah tells about a time when he was learning with Rav Gifter. They had come across a kasha – a question – that was posed by one of our great Sages, Rebbe Akiva Eiger, without any answer offered. And Rav Gifter and the Rosh Yeshivah managed to come up with an answer to the question that Rebbe Akiva Eiger has posed. Rav Gifter noted, however, that since they were able

to come up with such an answer, surely the great Rebbe Akiva Eiger would have come up with that same answer as well – and, therefore, there had to be something lacking in their answer – the answer could not possibly hold up to careful scrutiny – as, if it would have, Rabbi Akiva Eiger would have brought it himself! They proceeded to spend the next several hours – HOURS! – trying to determine where their answer was flawed – eventually succeeding in their quest. The Rosh Yeshivah noted that years later he saw a sefer published that included the very same answer that he and Rav Gifter had rejected! From his years in Telshe, the Rosh Yeshivah was instilled with great respect for our Sages and to focus his learning on trying to truly understand their words – their statements, their questions, their answers. The emphasis was not on trying to come up with novel interpretations (chiddushim) – not on trying to write his own commentaries, but on trying to bask in the wisdom that had been passed down to him. Take note - this is not the derech – the pedagogy (the method of instruction) – of every Yeshivah. But it was the hallmark of Telshe – and it is the hallmark of the Yeshivah Gedolah.



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein learning in his study after shacharis. (2004)

Tension between mimetic and textual traditions:

There is a certain tension within Judaism that exists between what Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik,⁷ he should live and be well, calls the “mimetic” transmission of Torah – i.e., the law as we experience, imitate, and practice it (in other words, what we imbibe from observing the conduct of our parents and others in the home, in the synagogue, and elsewhere) – and the textual transmission of Torah – i.e., the law as it is contained in books. Sometimes there is harmony between these two traditions and sometimes there is not. Rabbi Soloveitchik uses the example of the average kosher kitchen. As he puts it: “The simple fact is that the traditional Jewish kitchen, transmitted from mother to daughter over generations, has been immeasurably and unrecognizably amplified beyond all halachic requirements. Its classic contours are the product not of legal exegesis, but of the housewife’s religious intuition imparted in kitchen apprenticeship.”

When I was the Director of Kashrut for the Beth Din of Johannesburg, I assisted them with producing the annual Pesach Guide that they publish for the South African Jewish community. I noticed that the Beth Din required that people have a quantity of matzah at their seder that differed from what I remembered

learning from the Rosh Yeshivah. To simplify matters, the Beth Din advocated eating two olive-size measurements of matzah for the Afikomen, and the Rosh Yeshivah advocated eating only one such measurement.

I checked my notes – and was certain that the Rosh Yeshivah had said to eat only one olive-size measurement. I checked some of the seforim that I have that deal with such matters – one of them being the Mishna Berurah by the famed Chofetz Chaim – and these seforim clearly said that it was preferable to have two olive-size

measurements for the Afikomen. I was at a loss at the discrepancy. I mentioned what I had found to one of the Dayanim from the Beth Din and I remember distinctly his shock and his immediate response: “But the Mishna Berurah says that it’s ‘tov’ [that it’s good] to consume a second such measurement!”

A few days later, we were at Noa’s mother’s house for the burning of the chometz on the eve of Pesach, and Noa’s brother, Rabbi David was there. Noa’s brothers Rabbi David and Rabbi Avi are the Roshei Yeshivah (the heads) of the Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg. Noa mentioned to her brother the discrepancy that I had noticed. Many years before, Rabbi David had also noticed this very same discrepancy and once asked their father about it. The Rosh Yeshivah noted that he was well aware of what the seforim said regarding it being preferable to have two

⁷ Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy, by Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik, Tradition, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1994). I am indebted to Rabbi Sam Thurgood, a mushmach of Yeshivah Gedolah, for bringing this article to my attention.

olive-sized measurements, rather than just one, but he responded, "I never saw anyone do that."

Now the Rosh Yeshivah rubbed elbows with very big people; he had contact with the foremost Rabbinic authorities of his generation. When confronted with a contradiction between what he had observed and been taught by his Rebbeim and what was written in a book somewhere – he chose the tradition that had been personally handed down to him. The Rosh Yeshivah always cautioned that a person must be careful not to engage in behaviour that casts a negative light or aspersions on previous generations – to not think that somehow we are holding on a higher level than they did. For him, the answer to such a discrepancy was simple: He did not deviate from what he had witnessed. "I never saw anyone do that." And implicit in that simple statement is another statement, which shows his tremendous humility: "Who am I to do differently from them?" The Rosh Yeshivah forever remained a devoted student – and until his dying day he refused to deviate from what he had been taught by his teachers. "Who am I to do differently from them?"

Measurements:

While we're on the topic of measurements – there is another story that I would like to mention. The Talmud frequently refers to common items as its basis for various measurements – a tefach, i.e., a hand's-breadth; an amah – i.e., an arm's-length; a k'zayis, i.e., an olive-size; a k'beitzah, i.e., an egg-size; and the list goes on and on. Now, obviously, these sizes are not precise – and can vary slightly in our estimations. It has become quite fashionable to try and come up with ridiculously exacting measurements for these things, well beyond what is required by the Torah. I remember even seeing that someone had actually published a sefer full of pictures of popular food items to show people the quantity of those items that would require a bracha-achrona – an after blessing.

When we arrived in South Africa in 2006, it was shortly after Purim and just a couple of weeks before Pesach. After the bracha (i.e., the kiddush) Shabbos morning at the yeshivah, the Rosh Yeshivah would give a shiur to the bochurim, and because Pesach was so soon, some of the discussion and ensuing questions focused on Pesach. One of the bochurim inquired as to what the proper measurement (shiur) was that one should eat for the mitzvah of achilas matzah (of eating matzah at the seder). We spoke of the Afikomen before – now that's a separate mitzvah and that's the matzah that ends the meal. Here the question was regarding the matzah that starts the meal – the motzi matzah. The Rosh Yeshivah replied that he did not wish to answer such a question. The boys pressed him, saying that they "needed to know," and the Rosh Yeshivah eventually relented, saying that instead of simply telling them an amount, he would learn with them the relevant portions of the Shulchan Aruch and Mishna Berurah on the subject so that they would be able to determine the appropriate amount for themselves. Nowadays, they actually sell laminated cards which

graphically illustrate – with supposedly tremendous precision – how much of each type of food (matzah, maror, etc.) a person must consume at the seder. When presented with the same question, the Rosh Yeshivah chose to teach what the halacha actually states:

1. For that first eating of matzah, we are meant to have a quantity equal to two olive-size measurements.
2. Two olive-size measurements are the equivalent of an average size egg.
3. An average person should be able to comfortably swallow the volume of an average size egg at one time – in one single swallow – without any difficulty.

And there's our answer. Precise? As precise as the halacha requires and no more.

Towards the end:

There are certain words that come to mind when I think of the Rosh Yeshivah: Seder (and I don't mean the Pesach Seder – I mean the Hebrew word for "order", seder – which is the same word used for our Pesach Seder – as it is, depending on how you count it, a 14 or 15-step ordered process) is one of them. The Rosh Yeshivah was very deliberate about everything that he did. Everything had its time and place.



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein at the wedding of his youngest son Rabbi Aron and his wife Dina (Cape Town, South Africa). (2005)

The Rosh Yeshivah passed away in the month of November – and for his last Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, the family made a minyan at the house for him. Although I was present, I am indebted to Aron Ziegler who kindly typed up the notes that he had written up after that Yom Kippur, so that I did not have to rely solely on my memory of that very emotional event. I was convinced at the time that the Rosh Yeshivah knew that it was his last Yom Kippur (in fact, I told my wife

as much when I returned home). Each year, just before Ne'ilah, the Rosh Yeshivah would always read a stirring passage from the Mishnah Berurah, admonishing people to gird their loins and take advantage of beseeching Hashem before the heavenly gates closed at the end of Ne'ilah. His last Yom Kippur, he took a slightly different approach.

The Rosh Yeshivah explained that, during the past year in which he had suffered from heart failure and was unable to perform much, if any, of his former duties – albeit not for lack of trying, he had experienced great simcha from seeing that the work to which he had devoted his entire life would continue – that everything that he and his Rebbetzin had sacrificed so much to build would endure under the very capable guidance of their children.

He further noted that in each of the past few years, there had been someone – someone to whom he and the family had been close – who was here one Ne'ilah, but was no longer with us by the next one. There was his brother, Uncle Yankel, z"l, who had passed away at the age of 71. There was Richard Crouse, a"l, who had been strong and in the prime of his health. And there

was Rabbi Graham Finkelstein, a"h, who was a young man. He noted that there are no guarantees that a person will be here from one Ne'ilah to the next. He explained that Ne'ilah is the sealing of our judgment – and that if we did not return to Hashem now – then when?

He proceeded to express his gratitude for all of the hard work and sacrifices – both in the past and on-going in the present – on the part of his beloved family (as well as the close friends who were present) to build the Yeshivah and Hirsch Lyons.

He then asked that the following message be passed on to those family members who could not be present: He said, "It is now the time that the third generation – i.e., the grandchildren – is coming to the stage where they are being faced with decisions to choose as to the direction of their lives. The Torah needs both those who will be the Zevulunim – the supporters of Torah, and those who will be the Yissachars – those who will study and teach the Torah. For those who feel that the business world calls them - they should work hard and support the Torah. They should give. Those who want to become the Yissachars – they must sit and learn and grow great in Torah. They have to say goodbye to the fancy cars and must sit and learn." [I must note that the Rosh Yeshivah did not advocate an endless, bottomless pit of full-time learning – a career-student if you will – as is the fashion in many parts of the Jewish world nowadays. The Rosh Yeshivah did not agree with such a hashkafa (philosophy). A person could only learn for so long before he had to go out into the community and take on a position as a teacher or Rabbi or some other communal function.]

Contrary to the message conveyed by the chareidi world – there is nothing wrong with working. Contrary to the message conveyed by the secular world – there is nothing wrong with learning and teaching. Each plays a fundamental role in the world of Torah and each needs the other. "Im ein kemach, ein Torah. Im ein Torah, ein kemach." (Avos 3:21) "If there is no flour – no sustenance – there is no Torah. If there is no Torah, there is no flour – no sustenance." In the Rosh Yeshivah's book, either you were primarily an "Earner" or you were primarily a "Learner". In either case – the end goal was the same – for the sake of Hashem's Torah. (Make no mistake: those who are primarily "Earners" still need to learn and those who are primarily "Learners" still need to earn.)

Some personal stories

Tanai'im

There is a long standing Jewish custom that when a man and woman get engaged, their parents would sign tana'aim – this literally translates as: "a set of conditions". Basically, the parties were agreeing that their children would marry, when they

would marry, the amount of the dowry, the financial arrangements that had been agreed to, etc. This was a binding agreement performed in accordance with halacha. At the signing of the tanai'im, it is customary for the mothers of the choson and kallah to break a plate. In America and many other places, it has become fashionable to only sign the tanai'im at the choson's tish just before the choson and his kallah step under the chuppah and actually get married.

Noa and I met in Chicago and I refused to get engaged without giving her parents the opportunity to meet me and without first asking their permission. Before coming to South Africa to meet the Goldfeins and get engaged, the husband of one of Noa's cousins took me aside and said: "Look, just a heads up, they're going to expect you to sign tanai'im when you get engaged. You should discuss this with your Rav before you go so you'll know what to say and do." Now anyone with whom I discussed the matter advised me: DO NOT DO IT - DO NOT SIGN TANAI'IM.

After we arrived and got the formalities out of the way, I discussed the matter privately with the Rosh Yeshivah in his study. I asked him, why he insisted on signing tanai'im now, at the time of the engagement, instead of just before the chuppah, like everyone else did?

His response: "The question is not on why we sign tanai'im at the time of the engagement, the question is on why they stopped?" He proceeded to open a drawer in his office, from which he produced a file folder containing copies of the tanai'im of his children, his parents, and even his grandparents. He continued: "This is a long standing custom. Why did they stop doing it?" He offered his own theory as to why many had stopped signing tanai'im. He said, be it verbal or written, an agreement is an agreement. When people get engaged, they are making an agreement to get married. They are promising to marry each other. They are setting a date. The parents make promises regarding who will pay for what. People are under the erroneous impression that it is less of a problem to break an oral

commitment than to break a written one. They are mistaken. A person's word is his word regardless of the manner in which he gives it!

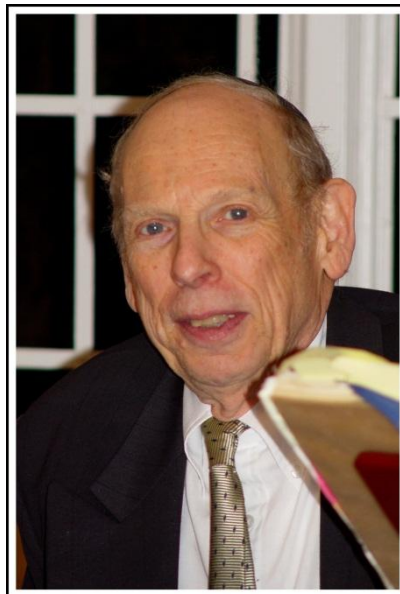
Needless to say, I did not need further convincing. We signed tanai'im.

Avodas Hashem:

I remember when Noa asked her father about teaching our children to say brachos – when the right time would be, etc. The Rosh Yeshivah emphasized that the most important thing was that it should not be something that became rote for the children – it should not be robotic.

Karyn – Living With Questions:

When we lived in Atlanta, there was a young lady who spent her first Shabbos by us. One Shabbos became two, two became



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein at the annual Purim gathering at his house. This was the last such gathering that he attended. (2007)

three, and she eventually became like a part of our family (a bas bayis). I would give her the Rosh Yeshivah's shiurim to listen to. One particular shiur⁸ upset her greatly. She was an ardent feminist, extremely liberal in her outlook, and she could not come to terms with a particular teaching from the Torah. The lesson that I had intended her to take away was not the one that she did. I was at a loss – I found all of the material on that subject that I could and we sat and learned it together. It did not help. She still could not come to terms with such a radically different perspective from her own. I asked Noa to please speak with her father and seek his advice regarding the situation.

Noa called her father and gave him the background to the situation. His response: "Is that her only kasha (question)? If that's her only kasha, she's doing fine. I've been learning Torah for more than 50 years. I have many kashas (many questions)." He didn't try to offer a pat answer. He didn't try to over simplify things. He didn't try to fudge things or present them dishonestly. He didn't try to make her feel bad for asking such a thing – or for being bothered by it.

Unfortunately – you will find people today who will do all of these things.

The Rosh Yeshivah understood that part of being a Jew – part of believing in and worshipping G-d - is learning to live with questions. There are answers – and we need to be patient. Thankfully, that young lady learned to live with her kasha and today she is a Torah observant Jew, married and the mother of two beautiful children.

Minhag:

There is a fundamental concept in halacha (brought in Pesachim) known as Minhag HaMakom. In a nutshell, one is not meant to deviate from the established customs of a particular community. This can become an issue when a person either moves or visits a community which has different customs from his own. When the Goldfeins were sitting shivah for the Rosh Yeshivah, someone in attendance would get up and speak each day about the Rosh Yeshivah after Shacharis and in-between mincha/ma'ariv. On one morning, a former talmid told the following story. It was Chol HaMoed Succos (the intermediary days of Succos) and consequently, the yeshivah was on holiday (bein hazmanim). But, as is often the case when the yeshivah is on holiday, there was still a minyan each day. This young man knew that the Rosh Yeshivah had chassidishe blood on his father's side, and that, consequently, many of the Rosh Yeshivah's personal customs differed from the prevailing customs of the largely Lithuanian South African community. Knowing that the Rosh Yeshivah did not personally wear tefillin during Chol HaMoed, this young man was certain that he would have no need to bring his tefillin with him when he decided to attend the yeshivah for shacharis during Chol HaMoed. Surely, he had surmised, the Rosh

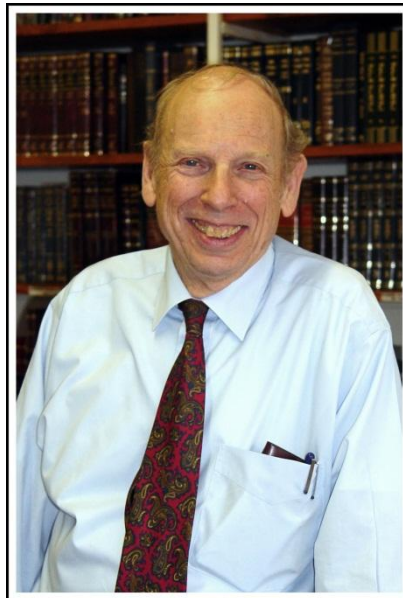
Yeshivah would follow his own custom in his own yeshivah, especially at an unofficial minyan during the time when the bochurim were on holiday!

When he entered the Beis Medrash, he was utterly shocked. The Rosh Yeshivah and all of his children and grandchildren were wearing tefillin! For a minute, this young man thought that maybe he had been mistaken regarding the Rosh Yeshivah's own custom. It was only later that he understood that the Rosh Yeshivah did not consider the fact that he was davening in his own yeshivah nor that he was doing so during a yeshivah holiday to be sufficient reasons to exempt him from the requirement to follow the local community custom of putting on tefillin during Chol HaMoed.

The Wednesday Evening Shiur:

When Noa and I were engaged, I made a specific request for a wedding present – a dowry, if you will. I wanted the complete collection of shiurim from the Rosh Yeshivah's Wednesday Evening Shiur (just so you understand this was no small request

– this was in the time of cassette tapes and by the time the Rosh Yeshivah passed away, he had delivered 828 public shiurim that had been recorded (some had not) – many of those shiurim took up more than one tape – it would be no exaggeration to say that there were 1,000 tapes in the collection!). Although Noa and I came to South Africa for our engagement and our wedding – on both of those occasions, the yeshivah was on holiday so the Rosh Yeshivah did not give his weekly shiur. Noa and I had been married for just over four years when I finally had my first opportunity to attend the Wednesday Evening Shiur in person! By that time, I had listened to some 100 shiurim from the Rosh Yeshivah. What didn't come through on the recordings – what couldn't come through on the recordings – was the tremendous simcha, evident on the Rosh Yeshivah's face as he gave that shiur. When he taught Torah, he had a smile that stretched the width of his face – and his eyes twinkled throughout. If you ever wanted to see what simcha – what joy – looked like – that was it!



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein in the Beis Medrash of the Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg. (2006)

I was also struck by the sheer volume of books that stood before the Rosh Yeshivah, neatly stacked, each with the appropriate reference places marked. The beauty – and genius – of the Rosh Yeshivah's shiurim is that they are accessible on ALL levels. A beginner can take away a thorough understanding of the topic at hand – and for those who are capable of deeper textual study, every source from which the Rosh Yeshivah quotes is clearly cited and referenced. A person could literally spend hours looking up the many sources cited by the Rosh Yeshivah and learning through them. It is difficult to fathom how he managed to find the time needed to prepare that weekly shiur in addition to all of the other shiurim that he gave at the yeshivah on a daily basis.

⁸ 1984 PH110 Ki Seitzei - "And you see amongst the captives a beautiful woman..." The Torah has considered the human weaknesses of man.

Muktza:

In my in-law's dining room, they have – by today's standards – a very simple, plain Aishes Chayil – unframed – hanging on the wall. On Friday evenings, when we stood around the shabbos table singing, I noticed that the Rosh Yeshivah would frequently remove this copy of Aishes Chayil from its place where it hung on the wall, refer to it, and then return it to its place afterwards. Now, I'd never investigated the matter properly, but my superficial understanding based upon many shabbos experiences in America was that pictures hanging on the wall were muktza (in other words, they fell under a category of items that were Rabbinically prohibited from being moved because one might actually come to violate Shabbos as a consequence). Being curious – I did what any intelligent person would do – I elbowed my wife and told her to ask her father. There's an expression that's used to describe someone who becomes angry with foolish people – we say that they don't suffer fools gladly. That expression didn't apply to the Rosh Yeshivah – who I witnessed many times patiently discuss things with even the most simple of people (present company included).

The Rosh Yeshivah, however, did not suffer foolishness gladly. When it came to narishkeit (foolishness) – perversion of Torah.....watch out. He did not have the patience for such things and he could be very sharp. I will not soon forget what transpired. The Rosh Yeshivah asked, "Why should moving the Aishes Chayil be ussur (prohibited)?" He waited for our response – and tapped his fingers on the table while he stared ahead, mentally considering and rejecting possible answers to his own question. After a few moments of silence, he stated what I think is quite literally the polar opposite of the attitude of today's generation: "Something is mutter (permitted) until you can show why it's ussur (prohibited) – not the other way around!" That appeared to be the end of the matter. He made Kiddush, we washed, and he made hamotzi on the challah.

And then, in case there remained any doubts on our part, the Rosh Yeshivah proceeded to give us an art lesson at the shabbos table - removing practically every picture that was hanging on the walls of their house. One-by-one, he brought each picture to the Shabbos table, where he discussed it in detail, before returning it to the wall and retrieving the next. When the Rosh Yeshivah taught at the yeshivah in St. Louis, there was a custodian at the school who was an amateur painter. The Rosh Yeshivah gave him many pictures and paintings to copy. Many of the artists lesser efforts are still in the yeshivah hostel – but some of his better pictures hang in the Rosh Yeshivah's home. In the dining room, hangs a picture of a chassid sitting at a table learning (see photo). The original picture from which the amateur artist copied it hangs in the foyer. The Rosh Yeshivah brought both pictures to the table, pointing out how delicate the brush strokes were in the original – how the artist was able

to capture the appearance and texture of the fur on the shtreimel, as distinguished from say the fringes on the cloth covering the table. He then noted how inferior these same brush strokes were in the amateur's copy of this painting – how amid the basic resemblance to the original the artist had failed to imitate these fine subtleties.

Although he never repeated it the rest of that night, the lesson that he had taught continued to reverberate loud and clear: "Something is mutter (permitted) until you can show why it's ussur (prohibited) – not the other way around!"

Pinchas – The Power of Torah:

I would like to conclude by sharing with you a story that gives us a glimpse into the power of Torah. Before moving to Johannesburg, Noa and I lived in Atlanta, Georgia, where a good friend of mine, Pinchas, whom I had known for several years prior, lived with his wife and children. (We lived in Atlanta from 2004 to 2006.)

The Rosh Yeshivah passed away in November of 2007. In April of the next year, 2008, a baby boy was born to Pinchas and his wife. The bris was scheduled for Chol HaMoed Pesach. Pinchas

called and asked whether we would mind if he and his wife named their baby after Noa's father.

At the bris, Pinchas explained why they had chosen the name. I would like to quote from his actual notes which he graciously scanned and emailed to me following the bris:

"There were several reasons that we thought that Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein was someone after whom we would want to name our son.

One was his unwavering commitment to Torah. Torah meaning true Torah – uncompromised by politics, societal suggestions, or personal agenda. To

give a perspective from close students of the Rosh Yeshivah, allow me to share brief excerpts from one of the eulogies that was written⁹:

"The Rosh Yeshivah despised superficiality and externalities in Judaism and in Torah. He was not about image, but about content; not about quantity, but about quality. The way he saw Torah in the Telshe Yeshivah – that was Torah, and he often spoke with a heavy heart about the type of things that were being presented as Torah in the modern Jewish world – and by this he meant the Orthodox camp. There were those who said that the Yeshivah Gedolah had no hashkafah (no outlook – no philosophy), but they were sorely mistaken. The Yeshivah does indeed have an outlook – it is Torah without nonsense, Torah



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein and Rebbetzin Clarice Goldfein in their home just before making havdalah (with Rivkah Sussman). The picture hanging on the wall in the background was painted by the custodian from the yeshivah in St. Louis. (2004)

⁹ From the transcript of a speech by Rabbi Matthew Liebenberg, 27 November at the Beit Ha'aval and again at Claremont Wynberg Shul on Shabbat morning 1 December, Parshat Vayeishev in a shortened form.

without decoration or 'shtick', just the pure thing without politics or dressing.'

'The Rosh Yeshivah was polite, honest, and ehrlich. He would often tell us that his Roshei Yeshivah would relate that in Lithuania they did not speak of a frumer yid but of an ehrlicher (honest and upright) yid. "Frumkeit (religiousity) was for the galachim (priests)," they would say.'

'The Mishnah in Sotah (9:9) states: When Yose ben Yoezer ish Tzreida and Yose ben Yochanan ish Yerushalayim passed away, the era of the eshkolot came to an end. The word eshkolot is a contraction of the words ish shehakol bo – a man in whom everything is found. Rashi explains (in the Talmud, 47b): "In such a person one finds Torah in its truest form, without any blemish or argument." The Rambam explains that an Eshkol refers to someone who contains within himself all of the finest qualities, attributes, and wisdom according to their type. This is how I would describe my dear Rosh Yeshivah – he was an Eshkol. He contained within himself Torah in its purest form, derech eretz, middot tovot, and all of the other attributes that a true talmid chacham should possess.'

I was introduced to the Rosh Yeshivah through his taped shiurim. I immediately felt a strong connection, as I identified with many of his messages, such as being learned and caring for others before taking chumras (stringencies) upon oneself. [As a result of the lessons in those tapes], I set about performing a "bedikas chometz" [referring to the search for 'leavened' food products that would take place the evening before Pesach – such products were prohibited during the actual festival of Pesach and the point of the search is to remove/destroy them] of sorts within myself, defining what was real about my Judaism and what was a façade."

And Pinchas sincerely meant what he said. The teachings of the Rosh Yeshivah had a tremendous impact on him and his entire approach to being Torah observant. He literally either stopped doing certain things or made radical and noticeable changes to the way he had been doing them. Just one example: The Rosh Yeshivah teaches in one of his shiurim¹⁰ the principle that: "A person must not be stringent at someone else's expense." The example that the Rosh Yeshivah gave in that particular shiur was one that really hit home for Pinchas. What was it? A person must not insist on eating a certain kind of matzah on Pesach (which comes at a significantly higher cost due to various stringencies observed in the manufacturing process) and pass on that expense to other people. In other words, a person should not insist on having a certain stringent standard that comes at an additional expense that will be borne by someone else (including his own parents or even his in-laws). Pinchas had

done this very same thing. I remember how deeply and profoundly this shiur had touched him.

What is truly amazing about the fact that Pinchas named his son after the Rosh Yeshivah, however, was that he had never met the Rosh Yeshivah. He had never even spoken to the Rosh Yeshivah. His only connection to the Rosh Yeshivah was via the many tapes that he had listened to and via the stories that we had told him. As a result of the influence of the Rosh Yeshivah's teachings, Pinchas made such significant changes to the way that he kept Torah that people around him actually thought that he had suffered, G-d forbid, a yeridah – that he had decided to be less observant. The truth was just the opposite! He was now living his life in accordance with what the Torah required of him – absent all of the misguided stringencies and the layers of superficiality that had piled up over the years. Just imagine the strength of character it takes to adjust the course of one's life, to head off in a new direction, and to do so under the scrutiny and critical eye of everyone around you!

Conclusion:

I sincerely hope that you have gained a greater understanding into who the Rosh Yeshivah was, where he came from, some of the principles that he stood for, and the profound loss that the

Goldfein family – and all of South Africa – have suffered with his untimely passing.



Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein and Rebbetzin Clarice Goldfein at the sheva brachos for their youngest son, Rabbi Aron and his wife Dina. (2005)

May Hashem continue to smile upon the Rosh Yeshivah's work and legacy; may the Yeshivah Gedolah – and Hirsch Lyons – continue to grow and flourish; and may the pure Torah that the Rosh Yeshivah represented – a Torah without distortion – without perversion – a Torah without politics, without personal agendas, without superficialities, without foreign influences – may that pure Torah continue to be spread by the many

talmidim that the Rosh Yeshivah left behind and through the many talmidim that Rabbi Avi and Rabbi David continue to produce at the Yeshivah Gedolah. May his memory be a blessing.

¹⁰ 2004 CHG167 – Chanukah: Hidur Mitzvah – The Challenges and Pitfalls