

Remembering the ROSH YESHIVAH

Some personal reflections and memories on the 10th
Yahrtzeit of Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



Inauguration of the new campus for Telshe Yeshivah in Cleveland. From left to right: Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Katz, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman, Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, Rabbi Goldfein. (1957)

IN 1972, RABBI AVRAHAM TANZER, ROSH YESHIVA of Yeshiva College, asked his old roommate and fellow Telshe, Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein, ztz"l, to come to South Africa and start a post-high school Beis Medrash (Talmud study) programme at Yeshiva College. On his initial visit, Rabbi Goldfein quickly recognised the incredibly fertile Jewish ground that existed in South Africa as a result of the predominately Lithuanian roots of the Jewish community. He reported back to his Rebbeztzin, may she live and be well, that it was a very promising opportunity for them to be marbitz Torah, to teach and spread Torah – one of the hallmarks of Telshe Yeshivah. Pregnant with their 7th child (my wife, Noa), Rebbeztzin Goldfein eagerly agreed to move half way around the world, sight unseen, for such an opportunity.

For a variety of reasons, things did not work out with the Beis Medrash programme. So, in 1978, with the boundless support and encouragement of his Rebbeztzin, Rabbi Goldfein started the Yeshivah Gedolah of Johannesburg. The goal was to give South African bochurim (yeshiva students) the opportunity to pursue the highest levels of Torah study in their own backyard, enabling students to pursue semicha (Rabbinic ordination) without having to study abroad, where they were bound to come into contact with and be influenced by foreign ideas and practices.

Rabbi Goldfein succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Counted among his many talmidim (students) are no less than the Chief Rabbi himself, Rabbi Dr

Warren Goldstein – the first South African-born-and-educated Chief Rabbi in the history of the country – and many of the community leaders, shul rabbis, and educators throughout South Africa today.

It is impossible to overestimate the impact that Rabbi Goldfein and the Yeshivah Gedolah have had on South Africa, and it would, likewise, be impossible to imagine a South African Jewish community devoid of his influence. Hard as it may be to believe, in just a few more days, on 2 December (14 Kislev), it will be Rabbi Goldfein's 10th yahrtzeit. In honour of this occasion, I would like to share some personal stories along with some of the lessons that I learned from him.

“WHAT’S HE TALKING ABOUT?”

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. When we first arrived in South Africa almost 12 years ago, we were privileged to live with Rabbi and Rebbeztzin Goldfein for the first six months as our flat was not yet ready for us to move into. While living in their home, we had the honour of spending a tremendous amount of time with Rabbi and Rebbeztzin Goldfein, including sharing dinner together most evenings. We were also blessed with spending many Shabbosos as well as a full cycle of the Yomim Tovim (the Shalosh Regalim – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkos) together. Less than a month after we moved out, Rabbi Goldfein suffered the heart attack which would eventually lead to his passing just over a year later.

Rabbi Goldfein did not talk about peo-

ple. He did not bear tales about others. He did not speak ill of or disparage others. He did not gossip. The only people he talked about were the great people that he was privileged to have met in his life and the lessons that he had learned from them.

This became quite evident when, while still living with my in-laws, I attended a local shul during one of the yeshivah holidays. At the sit-down bracha, the rabbi of the shul gave a vort (some words of Torah) followed by a discussion in which he highlighted a recent community scandal and tried to offer his advice on how best 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 the rabbi was speaking about. Everyone that is, except for me. I had to turn to the person seated next to me and whisper, "What's he talking about?" as I had no clue to what he was referring. I later learned that the scandal had not only been going on for several weeks, but had even made the secular newspapers. Did Rabbi Goldfein 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 any discussion about the matter.

Rabbi Goldfein was steeped in Torah, but at the same time very aware of what was happening in the world – of the latest advances and ideas in science and other areas of study, frequently discussing such things.

His Shabbos table was unlike any other that I have ever had the privilege to enjoy. A Shabbos meal would not pass without Rabbi Goldfein learning something directly from a sefer (book) 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 or received that week – and often times excerpts would be read aloud.

MAKE A BRACHA TO EAT, OR EAT IN ORDER TO MAKE A BRACHA?

Rabbi Goldfein'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, Rabbi Goldfein did not know from fast food. He ate two meals per day. At each of them, he washed on bread and sat down at a set table. Rabbi Goldfein saw the eating of a meal as part of his avodah (Divine service) to Hashem. Just as was the case with the calisthenics with which he started each day, 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 over a piece of bread was anathema. Pass up an opportunity to say what is arguably the only bracha that we are commanded to make by the Torah? Never. And he would frequently sing

the bentching. 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 (students) at the yeshivah would inquire from Rabbi Goldfein 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.

INVESTED IN TRUTH

Rabbi Goldfein 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 you 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 or ideas, he was invested in the truth and the truth alone. He had no ego.

IF WE COULD THINK OF IT, SURELY ONE OF OUR SAGES COULD

In his hesped (eulogy) for his Rebbe, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, ztz"l, the Rosh Yeshivah of Telshe Yeshivah, Rabbi Goldfein told a story that took place when they were learning together. They had come across a kasha (a question) that was posed by one of our great Sages, Rebbe Akiva Eiger, without any solution offered. Rav Gifter and Rabbi Goldfein managed to come up with an answer to the question that Rebbe Akiva Eiger had 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



Rabbi Mordechai Gifter speaking at the wedding of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Goldfein. (1959)

careful scrutiny, as, if it would have, Rabbi Akiva Eiger would have brought that solution himself!

Rabbi Gifter and Rabbi Goldfein proceeded to spend the next several hours trying to determine where their answer was flawed, eventually succeeding in their quest. From his years in Telshe Yeshivah, Rabbi Goldfein was instilled with great respect for our Sages and focused his learning on trying to truly understand their every word. The emphasis was not on trying to come up with novel interpretations (aka chiddushim), not on trying to write his own commentaries, but on trying to bask in the wisdom that had been passed down to him.

I once asked Rabbi Goldfein why he didn't publish some of the many ideas contained in the shiurim that he regularly gave, as surely many people would gain from having access to these ideas. He explained that a person has only so much time and energy and he was entirely focused on a single goal: building students. It would have been impossible to channel his energies into other areas without taking away from that goal.

"I NEVER SAW ANYONE DO THAT."

There is a certain tension within Judaism that exists between what Rabbi Haym Soloveitchik calls¹ the "mimetic" transmission of Torah (ie, 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 (ie, 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 unrecognisably 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 with producing the annual Pesach Guide



Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander with Rabbi Goldfein. (2007)

that they publish for the South African Jewish community. I noticed that the Beth Din required that people have a quantity of matzah at the seder that differed from what I remembered learning from Rabbi Goldfein. To simplify matters, the Beth Din advocated eating two olive-size measurements of matzah for the Afikomen, and Rabbi Goldfein advocated eating only one such measurement.

I checked my notes and was certain that Rabbi Goldfein had said to eat only one olive-size measurement. I checked some of the halacha seforim (books on Jewish law) that I have that deal with such matters and these seforim clearly



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Rabbi Goldfein at the annual Purim gathering at his house – the last such gathering that he attended. Seated at the table from left to right: Rabbi Ben Isaacson, Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, and Rabbi Avraham Tanzer. In the background are Rabbi Avi Goldfein with his son Betzalel, and Louis Flink, a"h. (2007)



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 utter shock and immediate response: "But the Mishna Berurah says that it's 'tov' (good) to consume a second such measurement!"

A few days later, we were at my in-law's house for biur chometz (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 had once asked their father about it. Rabbi Goldfein noted that he was well aware of what the seforim said regarding it being preferable to have two olive-sized measurements, rather than just one, but he responded, "I never saw anyone do that."

Now, Rabbi Goldfein 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 rebbe'im and what was written in a book somewhere, he chose the tradition that had been personally handed down to him.

Rabbi Goldfein 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?" Rabbi Goldfein forever remained a devoted student and, until his dying day, he refused to deviate from what he had been taught by his teachers.

"A PERSON'S WORD IS HIS WORD."

There is a long standing Jewish custom that when a man and woman get engaged, their parents sign tana'im – this literally translates as: "a set of conditions". Basically, the parties would make an agreement that their children would marry, when they would marry, the amount of the dowry to be provided, the financial arrangements that had been agreed to, etc. This was a binding agreement performed in accordance with halacha (Jewish law). At the

signing of the tana'im, it is customary for the mothers of the choson and kallah to break a plate. In many places, it has become fashionable to only sign the tana'im at the actually wedding, specifically at the choson's tish (groom's table), where he and his friends gather and documents like the kesuva (marriage contract) get completed, just before the choson and his kallah step under the chupah 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 tana'im when you get engaged. You should discuss this with your Rav before you go so you'll know what to say and do." Anyone with whom I discussed the matter advised me not to sign.

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

His response: "The question is not, 'Why do we sign tana'im at the time of the engagement?', the question is, 'Why did they stop [signing it]?'". He proceeded to open a drawer in his study, from which he produced a file folder containing copies of the tana'im of his children, his parents, and even his grandparents. He con-

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



tinued, "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 it is 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.

"IS THAT HER ONLY QUESTION? I HAVE MANY QUESTIONS."

When we were living in America, there was a young lady who spent her first Shabbos with us. One Shabbos became two, two became three, and she eventually became like a part of our family. I would give her Rabbi Goldfein's shiurim to listen to. One particular shiur² upset her greatly. 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 simply could not come to terms with such a radically different perspective from her own.

At my request, my wife 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 for the sake of keeping her connected. He didn't try to make her feel bad for asking such a thing, or for being bothered by it. Rabbi Goldfein understood that part of being a Jew, part of believing in and worshipping G-d and living a life of Torah, is learning to live with questions. There are answers and we need to be patient. Thankfully, that young lady learned to live with her question and continued moving forward.

BOUND BY LOCAL CUSTOM

There is a fundamental concept in halacha known as *Minhag HaMakom* (literally: the custom of the place). 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 Goldfein family was sitting shivah for Rabbi Goldfein, after Shacharis each day, someone in attendance would get up and speak about Rabbi Goldfein. On one morning, a former talmid (student) told the following story. It was Chol HaMoed Sukkos (the intermediary days of Sukkos) and consequently, the yeshivah was on holiday (*bein*

hazmanim). But, as was often the case when the yeshivah was on holiday, there was still a minyan each day.

This young man knew that Rabbi Goldfein had chassidishe blood on his father's side, and that, consequently, many of Rabbi Goldfein's personal customs differed from the prevailing customs of the largely Lithuanian South African Jewish community. Knowing that Rabbi Goldfein 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, Rabbi Goldfein would follow his own custom in his own yeshivah, especially at an unofficial minyan during the time when the bochorim were not in attendance, as they were away on holiday!

When he entered the Beis Medrash, he was utterly shocked. Rabbi Goldfein and all of his children and grandchildren were wearing tefillin! For a minute, this young man thought that maybe he had been mistaken regarding Rabbi Goldfein's own custom. It was only later that he understood that Rabbi Goldfein 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.

"SOMETHING IS PERMITTED UNTIL YOU CAN SHOW WHY IT'S PROHIBITED."

In my in-law's dining room, they have – by today's standards – a very simple, plain *Aishes Chayil* (the Hebrew text of the passage from Proverbs known as A Woman of Valour, traditionally sung at the beginning of the Shabbos meal on Friday evenings) – unframed, hanging on the wall. On Friday evenings, when we stood around the Shabbos table singing, I noticed that Rabbi Goldfein would remove this copy of *Aishes Chayil* from its place where it hung on the wall, refer to it as he sang, 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 *muktz*³



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

PHOTO BY: JOEY GOLDFEIN

(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 Rabbi Goldfein, who I witnessed many times patiently discuss things with even the most simple of people (present company included).

Rabbi Goldfein, however, did not suffer foolishness gladly. When it came to na'ishkeit (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. Rabbi Goldfein asked, "Why should moving the Aishes Chayil be assur (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 assur (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 we began the meal.

And then, in case there remained any doubts on our part, Rabbi Goldfein proceeded to give us an art lesson at the Shabbos table – removing practically every picture that was hanging on the walls of their home. 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 Rabbi Goldfein taught in St. Louis, there was a custodian at the yeshivah who was an amateur painter. Rabbi Goldfein gave him many pictures and paintings to copy. Some of the artist's better pictures hang in the Goldfein's home.

In the dining room hangs a picture of a chassid sitting at a table learning. The original picture from which the amateur



PHOTO BY: ROBERT SUSSMAN

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

artist copied it hangs in the foyer. Rabbi Goldfein 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 (the fur hat commonly worn by chassidim), 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 very fine subtleties.

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

"WHAT A LOSS FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE!"

It's a tradition for the current talmidim

and alumni of the Yeshivah Gedolah to come to the Goldfeins each year for a special get together on Purim, just as the holiday is ending. At the last such gathering where Rabbi Goldfein was present, Rabbi Tanzer 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:

"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 organisation that Telshe had founded in order to help assist with building the Jewish day school system across America. [The Va'ad would send students from Telshe to assist with teaching at these day schools. It was one of the students who had been sent by Telshe via this programme, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander, who was responsible for convincing Rabbi Goldfein to attend Telshe following his graduation from high school, rather than university, where he 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 Klal Yisroel (for the Jewish people) that would have been!'"

What a loss indeed. **IL**

¹Rupture 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 musmach of Yeshivah Gedolah, for bringing this article to my attention.

²1984 PH110 Ki Seitzei - "And you see amongst the captives a beautiful woman..." The Torah has considered the human weaknesses of man.

³The issue would be whether something hanging on the wall, even if it was not valuable, fell under the category of Muktzah Machmas Chisaron Kis (something set aside to avoid possible financial loss, and thus prohibited on Shabbos).

For more on Rabbi Goldfein:

- David Sassoon's 2014 documentary about Rabbi Goldfein, "Bridging Worlds", is now available for free viewing, visit: www.vimeo.com/112529742

Rabbi Goldfein's publicly delivered shiurim are available for free download and streaming:

- On the Weekly Parsha (#1 – 450): goo.gl/9gSv3; (#451 – 616): goo.gl/TPs9b2
- On the Yomim Tovim: goo.gl/I7xGP4
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