

His Passion *Was* KLAL YISRAEL

In memory of Mendy Klein a”h

BY Rabbi Yitz Frank

**HOW DOES
ONE EULOGIZE
A MAN WHO
IMPACTED THE
WORLD BUT
COMPLETELY
SHUNNED THE
SPOTLIGHT?**

How does one narrate greatness when every facet of the person's existence projected simplicity? In truth, that was the greatness of Mendy Klein *a”h*, a giant of chesed who truly saw himself as a regular “*poshute Yid*.”

While many people in the Jewish world have heard of Mendy Klein, the great *baal tzedakah* from Cleveland, few people really knew him. Many have seen the beautiful renovation of Kever Rochel that he and his *eishes chayil*, Ita, made happen. So many have been helped and given direction by Amudim, which Mendy founded, funded, and led; yet few have seen the breadth and scale of care that

he had for the “small stuff.” Whether there was a family who needed assistance with making a wedding, or a car died, or someone lost a job, Mendy was there. If someone needed a heart transplant or faced any kind of medical crisis, Mendy would spring into action. A shul, a kollel, kids at risk, substance abuse, schools, anything related to Cleveland, and the list goes on... Mendy would dive in head first. He would do anything for anyone.

Mendy only had one true passion project, and that was Klal Yisrael. Many people have specific (and important) interests. And yes, there were certain issues, causes, and organizations that Mendy was particularly passionate about. However, his theme was Klal Yisrael, and understanding that is the only real way to understand him. A method to the madness, if you will. Mendy was fond of repeating what he told his good friend Albert Ratner, a prominent philanthropist in Cleveland. “Albert, I sleep well at night knowing you worry about the world. I'll worry about Klal Yisrael.”

Mendy gave even when he didn't have, and that's why he

earned Hashem's trust. For many years he was in the fruit and vegetable business. He would call the heads of Matan B'Seyser in Cleveland and tell them he had an arrangement with a competitor who had a load of produce that was going to go bad, and that they can come pick it up for distribution. This would happen often. There was no competitor, it was all Mendy, giving even when he didn't have. That was just who he was.

At the funeral, and in subsequent conversations, his children revealed how he would come to their office and ask, “Do we have any big deals coming up? I have tzedakah projects I need to fund.” For Mendy, tzedakah wasn't a byproduct of his success — it was the whole point of his business. It was the goal, as his children noted.

One of the few things that would make him angry was if someone told him something couldn't be done. He had zero tolerance for small-mindedness. And he imparted that lesson to those privileged to know him well. In his own way, he was a great *mechanech*.

HAVING HAD THE great fortune to spend many hours

with Mendy, I was able to get a peek into his world. I, and others, would sit by his desk at various meetings. All the while, we could see his ever present, custom-designed Outlook churning out emails into his inbox. Messages from prominent politicians, noted philanthropists, and business partners would come in by droves, multiple times a minute. Pleas for assistance, random members of the community sharing the latest brilliance they discovered on the web, and notes from friends would fly in. He read every single one.

There are so many stories to share. And yet, so many that can never be shared. At the last Hebrew Academy of Cleveland board meeting, just two days before his *petirah*, he looked around the room and noted how happy he was to see young faces involved. And he told us all that we are the future. He said the exact same thing at the last Agudah of Ohio board meeting just two weeks prior. My last communication with him was the morning of his *petirah*. He wanted to know how he could block a legislative challenge to busing for private school students. I planned to reply Thursday evening when I



landed back in Cleveland from Washington, D.C. I never got the chance.

He supported so many institutions and causes for the *klal*, but he refused to write a check and just walk away. He wanted to know everything that was happening, for better or for worse. He simply cared too much. Mendy was unique, not because of his largesse, which was significant, but because of his heart. Mendy made micro-managing into an art form. He simply did not know how to rest. Many will chuckle at the memory of the typical 3 a.m. response to an email Mendy was prone to send during his nocturnal fits of wakefulness.

The corny jokes he would tell politicians and visitors to his office inspired all kinds of eye-rolling. Yet we might have totally missed it when he used that as a perfect segue to launch into a singularly

pointed and well-reasoned argument. Occasionally, he would briefly abandon his “everyman” exterior and show us how he became a titan of business. But that's not how he viewed himself. Most of the time, he was just plain old Mendy. The guy who gave out lollipops in shul, who never failed to attend his *chavrusa* on Shabbos with Rabbi Sonnenschein, the father who took immense pride in his children, the *balabos* who *sheped nachas* from the growth of Cleveland, as if he had nothing to do with it.

He would joke about all the politicians who would come visit him to admire his “good looks,” as he liked to say. He would show up at board meetings, in his ever present “Mendy” hat, blow up a discussion, challenge everyone to grow up, and then leave with a smile. He developed

relationships with people all over the world, and he never seemed to be impressed with himself, because he was friends with everyone. He would animatedly argue that everything that he was blessed with only came because of the *tzedakah* he gave. He truly believed that and would inspire others with his sincerity.

THERE ARE MANY STORIES and accounts of incredible acts of chesed that he performed. However, the greatest insight into his life, that continues to inspire me most, is that he viewed himself as a regular person. That was his real greatness. He could call you at any time, night or day, to deal with whatever was on his mind. He spread his heart so thin. Nothing was beneath him.

Rav Yehuda Jacobs, the longtime mashgiach at Beth

Medrash Govoha once said (at a *hesped* for Rav Elya Svei) that the definition of the word “*gadol*” is someone who is a *baal achrayus* — someone who accepts responsibility for others. Mendy never stopped adding to his *pekel* of *achrayus*. That is simply who he was. That was his *gadlus*.

Several weeks ago, Mendy had a *yahrtzeit* for his father. In shul, at our *Seudah Shlishis*, he recounted how his father would tell all of the grandchildren at the *Pesach Seder* how he was saved from Auschwitz through a miraculous occurrence, and he would point to his offspring and say, “You are my revenge on Hitler.” Mendy, from where you are, close to the Ribono shel Olam and sitting with your beloved Mama Rochel, you can point to every corner of the globe and state that claim.

Hashem gave us Mendy. And now He took him back. But just as his influence was always there, even if not directly felt, he is now in the supreme position to continue pulling his beloved strings. Menachem Moshe ben Naftali Hertzka was one of the greatest advocates for Klal Yisrael of our generation. That will not change now — he's simply closer to the controls.

Rabbi Frank is executive director of Agudath Israel of Ohio