

# Remembering Rabbi Avrohom Powers ז"ל



By Akiva Males

On *Motozei Shabbos Parshas Bolok*, July 23, together with so many of his other former *talmidim*, I was deeply saddened to learn of the passing of a first-class *mechanech*, who made a great impact on me and my Jewish development: Rabbi Avrohom Powers ז"ל. While the final chapter of Rabbi Powers' decades-long career as a gifted *mechanech* was spent in Philadelphia, prior to that, he served for many years as an extremely devoted and creative high school *rebbe* in Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim's branches in Rochester, NY and Milwaukee, WI.

I will always remember Rabbi Powers as the beloved 9th grade *rebbe* who found ways to get me and my classmates excited about Torah learning and *yiddishkeit*.

Here is one example of Rabbi Powers at his best:

In the fall of 1988, I began a new chapter in my life. I was a 9th grader settling into the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study (WITS) in Milwaukee, where the next four years of *yeshiva* high school would pass far too quickly.

It was September, and my classmates and I could sense the rapidly changing season. The leaves were starting to color, and we watched deer gracefully dart through the *yeshiva's* property and disappear into the woods. We had just enjoyed a *Rosh Hashanah davening* together unlike any we had known in our hometown *shuls*. We had less than a week of *yeshiva* remaining until *Yom Kippur*, after which we would return to our homes across the country to celebrate *Sukkos* with our families.

connection to him. He had an infectious smile, a sense of unbridled enthusiasm, and a palpable sense of concern for each of his young charges.

In the spirit of the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, Rabbi Powers asked us to spend a minute or two in thought and then compile a private list of what we would each like to change about ourselves in the coming year in order to become a better person.

While I have no recollection of the items I came up with, I will never forget that day's lesson. After a few minutes, Rabbi Powers asked us to look over our lists and cross off half the items. We were puzzled by his request. Why did he put us through the effort of compiling a lengthy list if we were just going to cross off half?

He then asked us to *again* cross off half of the remaining items. We were perplexed, and murmuring could be heard. Most of our lists were left with only one or two items of possible self-improvement. (I remember how one classmate from Chicago whispered to me that since his list was originally so short, he now had nothing left to improve about himself.)

Rabbi Powers quieted the room and went on to explain that *Chazal* teaches, "*Tofasta merubah lo tofasta* – if one attempts to take hold of too much, he takes hold of nothing."

The reason why most of us never carry through with our resolutions is that we have taken on too great an assignment. While it is important as human beings to dream big, it is crucial that we remain realists.

Close to 30 years have passed since that

morning's lesson, yet it is one I try to remember all the time. Self-improvement is a difficult business, and it goes against our basic nature. In order to experience the satisfying taste of success, our resolutions need to be realistic - and we need to be careful not to bite off more than we can chew. By setting realistic goals for ourselves, we stand the best chance of achieving the outcomes we desire.

Another memory from Rabbi Powers' Shiur:

That year, the *yeshiva* was learning *Maseches Yevamos*. Rabbi Powers developed what he called "logic sheets," which he designed to chart out many of the complicated *Yibum* scenarios we were learning about each day. On those sheets were the hand-drawn stick figures Rabbi Powers had designed to match the Gemara's discussions (he also amused us with the many names he came up with for those stick figure characters -- Big Bertha, Skinny Sam, etc.). Rabbi Powers' logic sheets went a long way in enabling us to understand the material at hand. I thought of him fondly a few years ago when I taught the *Mishnayos* of *Maseches Yevamos* to my *shul* - using charts on a whiteboard to help clarify the subject - in true Rabbi Powers style.

In Rabbi Powers, we knew we had a *rebbe* who loved each of us. We knew that we had a listening and caring ear that we could approach with anything that was on our minds. It was a strong connection that he built with us. I remember feeling like I was going to cry when at the end of my 10th grade year he told us he would be moving on to a different position in Philadelphia that summer. I distinctly remember doing all I could to control my emotions in the presence of my fellow classmates.

Rabbi Powers and I lost touch after he moved, but we reconnected after my wife and I moved to Harrisburg in 2007 (Harrisburg is less than a two hour drive from Philadelphia). We would call or write one another every now and then. Several months ago, Rabbi Powers called to tell me he had just finished reading an excellent book about an extremely dedicated *shul rov* who in his quiet and humble way impacted countless lives ("*Tzidkus Stands Forever*", written by Rabbi Yechiel Perr about

his father ז"ל). After reading that book - in 2016 - Rabbi Powers wanted to bring it to my attention - his student from 1988. He felt I could relate to many of the subjects discussed (I surely did), and that the book would provide me with much *chizuk*, which it certainly did).

When I called Rabbi Powers several weeks later to thank him and let him know how much I enjoyed the book, he told me about another book dealing with the giants of the *mussar* movement he had just finished reading ("*The Fire Within*" by Rabbi Hillel Goldberg). He encouraged me to read it as well, and declared "the book changed my life." I remember being taken aback at that statement. Did he just say, "the book changed my life"? Rabbi Powers was a veteran *mechanech* with decades of teaching behind him. One would assume that he had long ago completed his own journey of personal growth, and was now dedicated to simply sharing the knowledge he had accumulated with others. I smiled as I realized I had misjudged Rabbi Powers. He never believed that his own journey of personal growth had been completed, he continued to learn, think, and truly grow.

I smile today as I realize that Rabbi Powers found a way to subtly share one last lesson with me during that phone call. Of course I ordered the book, and I look forward to reading it soon. As I do, I'll try my best to discover what made that strong an impression on a *rebbe* for whom I have such deep respect.

On behalf of the many *talmidim* whose lives Rabbi Powers touched in such a positive manner, I say: Thank you so much for understanding and caring about us - and for all that you taught us. We'll do our best to follow your lead and try to continue growing.

May *Hakodosh Baruch Hu bentch* Rabbi Powers' dear *rebbitzin*, children, and grandchildren - who so generously shared him with decades of *talmidim* - with the *nechama* that only He can provide.

*Akiva Males served as rabbi of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania's Keshet Israel Congregation from 2007 to 2016. This summer, he and his wife Layala relocated to Memphis, TN, where he will serve as rabbi of the Young Israel of Memphis.*