

BY RABBI AKIVA MALES

On the 21st of *Shevat* 5778, February 6, 2018, the family of Rabbi Raphael Wachsmann *zt"l*, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivas Ohr Yechezkel / the Wisconsin Institute for Torah Study (WITS), suffered a tremendous blow with the passing of their beloved husband, father, and grandfather. Rabbi Wachsmann's immediate family knew him in a way that no one else did. Accordingly, the profound sense of loss they feel is one that only they can share.

I write these lines, however, as a member of Rabbi Wachsmann's very large "extended family." I proudly count myself among the many appreciative *talmidim* and alumni of his *yeshiva* in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to which he gave his heart and soul to create, build and maintain since 1980. While I cannot write a complete biography of Rabbi Wachsmann's life, I can share some strong impressions he made on me.

I recently came across this email exchange I had with Rabbi Wachsmann ten years ago, in August 2008:

Hi there, Rabbi Wachsmann. It was nice talking to you yesterday.

I've been thinking of you a lot lately.

At some point during my high school years (1988-1992), you taught us hilchos Shabbos using a black sefer titled "Kitzur Hilchos Shabbos" written by Rabbi Posen from KAJ in Washington Heights, NY.

When we learned about borer, I clearly remember you teaching us to always remember these three expressions: "miyad, biyad, and ochel mitoch p'soless."

Miyad = separating for immediate use. Biyad = separating with one's hands (or eating utensils) as opposed to a utensil designed to separate - like a strainer. Ochel mitoch p'soless = removing what I want from what I do not desire.

Those are the three conditions under which one can avoid all borer prohibitions.

(I also remember your test wherein you asked us how we could help your son Yossi pick out the red socks he wants to wear on a Shabbos morning while avoiding borer.)

Fast forward to 2008. Each morning after davening in Harrisburg, PA, I teach a brief halacha from that same black Kitzur Hilchos Shabbos sefer. We are currently in the middle of borer. On several occasions, I have told the shul about your insisting that we always remember miyad, biyad, and ochel mitoch p'soless, as those terms are the keys to avoiding borer.

I know it's a bit delayed, but thanks for teaching us hilchos Shabbos.

If only I had hung on to my notes . . .

All the best,

Akiva Males

Rabbi Wachsmann responded:

Thank you. It's a good feeling to know that there are those who not only listened, but remember years later.

This interaction between us says so much. I noted that I had spoken with Rabbi Wachsmann the previous day. What were the circumstances of that phone call? Rabbi Wachsmann had called me absolutely out of the blue. I had only been in sporadic contact with him since graduating from WITS' high school in the summer of 1992. Sixteen years later, Rabbi Wachsmann just called to reconnect. He knew that my wife and I had relocated to Harrisburg the previous summer to serve as a *shul* rabbi. He wanted to know how we were doing, what the state of Harrisburg's Jewish community was, and how we were adjusting to this new stage in our lives.

Rabbi Wachsmann asked me to forward him any monthly *shul* e-mail newsletters I would create, and told me that he was root-



ing for us to succeed.

The feelings of concern and *nachas* that he expressed and the hopes he had for me as



a *talmid* were genuine - and greatly appreciated. I was glad to reestablish a connection with Rabbi Wachsmann, and from that point on, we regularly stayed in touch. In addition, I always knew I could count on him for a quick "*yasher koach*" or a "keep up the good work" in response to my newsletters or articles that I would forward to him. His feedback truly meant a lot to me.

Since Rabbi Wachsmann passed away close to six months ago, the following two memories of him keep coming to my mind.

MY FIRST INTERACTION WITH RABBI WACHSMANN

The first time I met Rabbi Wachsmann was during the spring of 1988. WITS had invited my 8th grade class from the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland to spend a *Shabbos* at the *yeshiva*. The obvious hope was that some of us would choose to spend our *yeshiva* high school years there. My class enjoyed an incredible *Shabbos* in Milwaukee, and five of us decided that WITS was exactly the *yeshiva* we wanted to attend (one of the best decisions I've ever made).

After *davening* on *Shabbos* morning, Rabbi Wachsmann warmly invited me and my classmates to come over to his house

that afternoon. With his uncanny ability to relate to the next generation on their level, he told us we'd enjoy refreshments, meet his sons, and could even shoot some pool in his basement. That last detail is what caught my attention. Although he could not have known it, I was going through a stage where I was mad for shooting pool. (I later learned that the previous owners of the Wachsmann family's home were unable to remove their bulky pool table from their basement before moving. Providentially, Rabbi Wachsmann ended up equipped with yet another tool to reach the hearts of his *talmidim*.)

A few of us 8th graders took Rabbi Wachsmann up on his invitation and enjoyed a fun-filled *Shabbos* afternoon at his home. I recall meeting and hitting it off with two of the Wachsmann boys, Tzali and Avromi. I vividly remember the welcoming, friendly and wholesome atmosphere that the Wachsmann home exuded.

I honestly think that that enjoyable *Shabbos* afternoon at the Wachsmann house played a role in my decision to spend the next four years of my life - which went by far too quickly - at WITS. Don't ever believe that nothing good can come from a billiards table...

MY LAST INTERACTION WITH RABBI WACHSMANN

Rabbi Wachsmann was always looking for opportunities to assist others. None of us will come close to discovering just how many people's lives he was able to touch in any number of meaningful ways. I keep thinking about a small way Rabbi Wachsmann tried to assist my wife and me.

During the summer of 2015, we were privileged to visit our family in Israel. It just so happened that Rabbi and Rebbetzin Wachsmann were spending time there as well. I don't know how, but Rabbi Wachsmann found out that we were in Israel, and I was quite surprised when I answered my rented Israeli cell phone one day and heard his exuberant "*Shalom Aleichem, Reb Akiva!*"

Unfortunately, we were at the tail end of our trip, and after spending two days in Netanya, we were scheduled to return to America. I apologized to Rabbi Wachsmann and explained that we'd love to see him and his wife, but we would not be returning to Yerushalayim before leaving Israel. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to treat us to a meal, Rabbi Wachsmann immediately kicked into "Plan B" instead. He insisted on sharing every piece of information he could to help us fully enjoy our time in Netanya: where to eat, where to *daven*, what to see, and so much more. I couldn't help but smile as I jotted down the many details he gave me.

The feelings of disappointment Rabbi Wachsmann expressed about not being able to get together were so sincere. He told me how much he and his wife wanted to see us, catch up, and reconnect. Since his passing, I strongly regret that our paths just couldn't cross on that trip to Israel. At the time, I mistakenly assumed that we'd surely be able find future opportunities to enjoy one another's company. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

I will forever feel a deep sense of *hako-ras hatov* to Rabbi Wachsmann for all he did for me and all of my fellow WITS alumni. I am certain that I speak for all of his *talmidim* when I say that we will forever miss Rabbi Wachsmann's warm smile, the genuine sense of care he so easily conveyed, and the reassuring feeling of knowing that he was cheering for us - all the way off in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Yehi zichro boruch.

Since the summer of 2016, Akiva Males has served as rabbi of Young Israel of Memphis, TN. He can be reached via e-mail at rabbimales@yahoo.com.