

A SPECIAL TRIBUTE

The Mara D'Asra

A TRIBUTE TO RAV YEHUDA KELEMER, ZT"l





It awed me to see the humble gaon, who didn't care about his own kavod in the least, act as if he were just some pashut rabbi.

The term “*mara d’asra*” is bandied about these days rather loosely. It is used to mean the rabbi of any *shul*, no matter how large or how small. But technically, it’s not really true. The Aramaic word “*asra*” means place, a significant community, *shtetl* or even a city. There is no *asra* called “Congregation This” or “*Kehillah* That.”

Rav Yehuda Kelemer, was not just a *rav*. He was not only a *gaon* and a *tzaddik*. Indeed, there are *rabbanim* who are in charge of *kehillos* comprised of two or perhaps three *shuls*. But Rav Kelemer was *rav* of the second largest Young Israel in the United States, in a community with more than 1,000 *shomer Shabbos* families and at least five thriving *shuls* representing the spectrum of Orthodoxy. Not one *beis haknesses* would ever think of doing anything novel without discussing it first with Rav Kelemer. This was not because of any fear they had of ramifications; it was due to the love and reverence—even awe—they had for him.

Even though the message that was sent out via email exhorted people not to attend the *levayah* inside the *shul* because of COVID regulations, that couldn’t stop the throngs who stood outside and followed the *aron* through the streets of West Hempstead. I cannot begin to count the number of people I met, as I was walking, who expressed how close they felt to him, tears streaming down the faces of grown men and women as they paid him the *kavod ha’acharon*.

I was one of those, as was my father, *zt”l*, who were also *zocheh* to feel the same way. It awed me to see the humble *gaon*, who didn’t care about his own *kavod* in the least, act as if he were some *pashut rabbi*. Under his gray fedora there was a *kop* filled with *Shas* and *poskim*, esoteric *teshuvah sefarim*,



Rav Yosef Kelemer (Rav Yehuda’s grandfather) with Rav Aharon Kotler

maamarei sod and *chasidus*, as well as the wisdom to offer counsel and comfort over his more than four decades in *rabbanus*.

Under his simple short jacket, which was not always black, beat a heart that shared the joy and pain of families with *tzaros*, *almanos* and *yesomim*, children looking for a way back home, and *yeshivah* administrators who were struggling to make payroll. I say that because I remember how often my father wanted to engage the burgeoning community of West Hempstead and honor him at the Yeshiva of South Shore’s annual dinner. He and his beloved Rebbetzin Rachel (née Walkin), a descendent of the Pinsker Rav, *zt”l*, had entrusted the *chinuch* of his five wonderful sons to my father, and my father truly wanted to honor them. Certainly, honoring Rav Kelemer would bode well for the honor of the *yeshivah* as well.

But Rav Kelemer refused to accept any honor. Instead, he established a scholarship fund in memory of his late mother-in-law, Rebbetzin Tzivia Walkin, and wrote a letter to everyone in the community to donate money to the *yeshivah*. He continued to do so year after year.

But it wasn’t only about the *yeshivah*. It was about every individual. He loved my father and afforded him the utmost respect—never, ever saying that he couldn’t take his call. I only recently learned that although he had come home from the hospital after a devastating accident just weeks before my father’s *petirah*, he refused to sit at the *levayah*, and leaned on his walker for several hours.

In truth, I was humbled by the appreciation he showed to our *yeshivah*. Countless times, I or our executive director would receive a phone call and hear an apologetic voice on the other end asking forgiveness for intruding on what might have been a busy day. “Hello, this is Yehuda Kelemer,” he would begin. “I don’t want to, *chas v’shalom*, interrupt whatever you are doing, but there’s a boy in your *yeshivah* who lives in West Hempstead...” He would go on to describe a family situation—an illness, a lost job, a *shalom bayis* crisis—and ask that instead of billing them for the next few months, he would cover whatever the *yeshivah* needed. He always came through.

Never did we have to call him. He knew everyone in the community, whether he *davened* in his *shul* or another smaller *minyán*. He was the *mara d’asra*.

Not long ago, my wife called him for advice regarding a girl from West Hempstead who was struggling in her large high school. The family situation wasn’t simple. Within three days, he had arranged a con-

He negated his own needs, and with the mesiras nefesh of his rebbetzin and family, he became a father to so many.

ference call with my wife, the *menaheles* of the school, who is a world-renowned educator, and himself. He would not hang up until he was assured that the young girl would be given a chance to succeed.

Rav Kelemer showed up when you least expected it, and stayed for as long as he was needed. At the *levayah*, a story was related about a young man who asked to speak to him. He walked into his office but couldn't get a word out. Each time he tried, he broke down. Although Rav Kelemer was busy from early morning until late at night, when the young man walked in, everything stopped. He sat patiently for an hour in silence, until the fellow composed himself and was able to speak.

One time, I called him up and he said, "Is it okay if I call you back between 10:55 and 11:15 tonight? I am trying to stop an autopsy." My phone rang at precisely 11:07, and as we conversed for the few minutes, I felt like I was the only one on the planet.

I will never forget receiving a frantic phone call from him many years ago on a Friday afternoon, only a few hours before Shabbos. Senator Schumer had recently given a speech at our annual dinner, and he figured that I had a relationship with him. "I need to get in touch with the senator immediately!" he explained. "Can you get me his number?" A young man had run off to Eretz Yisrael, and his parents were desperate to find him before he could do anything dangerous. They needed passports in order to get on the first flight after Shabbos.

When it came to Jewish lives, there was no night and no day for Rav Kelemer, and there was certainly no "zich." Like his *mechutan*, as Rav Shmuel Kamenetsky said in his *hesped*, "He lived for *klal Yisrael*." He negated his own needs, and with the *mesiras nefesh* of his *rebbetzin* and family, he

opened. It seems there was a question of *pikuach nefesh* in which a brother and sister were arguing about end-of-life issues with regard to their 95-year-old mother. Not only did Rav Kelemer have to *pasken*, but he went to the hospital room to make sure that his *psak* was carried out. The final decision was made so close to Shabbos that he had to walk home from the hospital—a trek of over three hours.

Who would believe that a *rav* who said *Kedushah* surrounded by little *kinderlach* and who went to the homes of *almanos* with his children to make *Kiddush* for them, was the same *rav* who had written countless *teshuvos* to Rav Moshe, *zt"l*? Of course, this was the same man about whom Rav Elyashiv would say when people came to him with a question, "You have Rav Kelemer in America. Go ask him." It would be hard to believe that this Jew, who walked with his flock as one of them, was a *chavrusa* of Rav Mordechai Gifter, and was referred to by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz as a "*chad b'dara*," one in a generation.

Rav Kelemer returned to Eretz Yisrael for a sabbatical to learn in the Mir, decades after he had learned there. Every day, the *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Nochum Partzovitz, would review his *shiur* with his former *talmid*. It is said that Rav Kelemer would respond, "Rebbe, 20 years ago the *rosh yeshivah* learned that *Rashi* with a different *knaitch*."

Just recently, a local *posek* whom I know to be proficient in *Shulchan Aruch* and *poskim* told me, "A few months ago I had a difficult *sh'eilah* that I discussed with other *rabbanim*. No one was sure what to do. So I called Rav Kelemer, who gave me the names of two little-known *teshuvah sefarim* from *geonei Lita* who discuss the *sh'eilah*, and he *paskened* it for me on the spot."

Rav Kelemer, whose grandfather was a *rav* in Kaminetz-Podolsk, with a laudatory *smi-*



Rav Kelemer giving a drashah in his shul

became a father to so many. He wore old hats and old suits, and refused to allow his *kehillah* to buy him new ones. He refused the new car they had already bought him: "I should drive a new car while people in the *shul* are struggling for *parnasah*?" he asked upon learning about it.

His *mesiras nefesh* for *shalom* and *halachah* was unimaginable. One of his children related how they had once had a distinguished guest for the Friday night *seudah*. Rav Kelemer called the man right before Shabbos and asked *mechillah*, explaining that he would be late and he should tell the *rebbetzin* to start the *seudah* without him.

Rav Kelemer didn't come until 10:30 p.m. The guest later revealed what hap-

BY RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY



chah from Rav Yitzchok Elchonon Spektor, was also a tenth-generation descendant of the Baal Shem Tov. He grew up in Los Angeles but made his way to Ner Yisroel and then Telshe, where he learned for five years, many of them as a *chavrusa* with Rav Gifter, who cherished him dearly. He then went to learn in the Mir under Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz and his son-in-law Rav Nochum Partzovitz.

His first position as an American *rav* was in Brookline, Massachusetts, where he became well-known for his brilliant insights and proficiency in *hal-achah*. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik didn't worry about leaving Boston to attend to his many obligations, telling his *kehillah* that they could ask Rav Kelemer any *sh'eilah* that arose.

In 1983, he was asked to lead the emerging community of West Hempstead on Long Island. With grace and vision he encouraged other *rabbanim* to settle there and open *shuls* and Torah institutions that would enhance the entire neighborhood.

I myself experienced what both his son-in-law, Rav Nahman Ginsparg, and his *mechutan*, Rav Eliyahu Chaim Sverdloff, referred to in their *hespedim*. "When you were sitting next to him at a *simchah* and someone would come over to say *mazel tov*, he wouldn't just accept the handshake, he would introduce him to those around him. 'This *Yid* just made a *siyum* on *Maseches Sukkah*,' he'd say. 'Or this *Yid* is one of the most wonderful *baalei chesed* in my *kehillah*.' He always had a kind word for everyone."

Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Kelemer once met a man who asked him, "Are you related to a Rabbi Kelemer who used to be in Brookline 40 years ago?" When he explained that he

was his son, the man got all excited. "I once had to be in Brookline and spent a night in your parents' house. It was one of the most memorable evenings I have ever had in my entire life!"

One of Rav Kelemer's children related a conversation he had with his father about a story brought down in *Sefer Chasidim*. Not only did Rav Kelemer know the story, he also knew which editions hadn't included it. The story was about a shepherd who didn't know how to *daven*. Every day, he would

look heavenward and declare, "*Ribbono Shel Olam*! I am only a lowly shepherd. I don't know how to *daven*, but I promise that any sheep you send my way I'll take care of for free!"

A *rav* derided the man for his silly prayer, until he had a dream chastising him from Heaven. "We wait in *shamayim* every day for that shepherd's offer!" he was told. "How dare you belittle it!"

Rav Kelemer told his son: "That story should be emblazoned on the walls of every *shul* in the world."

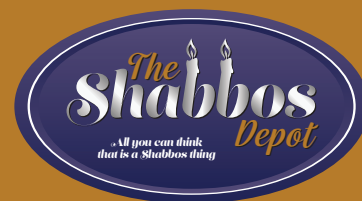
Rav Kelemer was a true *ro'ei Yisrael* who shepherded any sheep the *Ribbono Shel Olam* sent his way, with no questions asked or thought of remuneration. In fact, nothing in this world could ever compensate him for the endless time, effort, love and devotion that he invested in *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* flock. *Yehi zichro baruch*. ●

● Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky is the *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshiva Toras Chaim Bais Binyamin at South Shore and the author of *Parsha Parables* series. You can follow Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky's daily podcast on tefillah, widely available on all major podcast players.



Rav Kelemer speaking at a *simchah*

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