



An Indelible Memory of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt”l

A MEMORABLE TRIP TO THE AIRPORT TO MEET A GADOL



Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt”l, speaking to the students of the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland in November 1982

In the busy days leading up to Pesach, there was no shortage of incoming phone calls, text messages and emails. However, one night I received a message that was different from those I had received on all other nights.

While engaged in his pre-Pesach cleaning, my brother Micha in Baltimore had chanced upon and shared with me and my siblings a letter that was almost 40 years old. It was from the administration of our alma mater, the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland (HAC), and it awakened much nostalgia.

With this “historic document” in hand, I reached out to HAC’s current leadership, school *rebbeim* from decades ago, and a family member of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt”l. Thanks to them, I was able to fill in parts of an extremely memorable childhood event my brother and I experienced when he was 12 years old and I was eight. This episode had left a huge impression on both of us, and we relished the opportunity to relive it together.

Like all *yeshivah* day-school students growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, our

rebbeim frequently shared *divrei Torah* from and anecdotes about two of the great rabbinic luminaries guiding the American Orthodox Jewish community—Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, and Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky (endearingly referred to as Reb Moshe and Reb Yaakov). We marveled at stories about them and could easily identify their pictures in Jewish publications. However, they lived in New York and we resided in Cleveland. We never imagined that we would have the opportunity to meet either of these Torah

giants in person. That changed during the 1982-83 school year.

On Sunday, November 21, 1982, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky flew from New York to Cleveland in order to attend the *bris milah* of his great-grandson Binyomin Neustadt. The baby's parents, Rabbi Doniel and Rebbetzin Etti Neustadt, were living in Wickliffe (just outside of Cleveland proper), where Rabbi Neustadt was learning in Telshe Yeshiva's *kollel*. (Rebbetzin Neustadt is a daughter of Rabbi Avraham Kamenetsky, ז"ל, the youngest son of Reb Yaakov.) Although he visited Cleveland for just one day, it made quite an impact on us. In preparing this article, I learned that many others remember his visit as vividly as we do.

At HAC, Sunday was not a day off. After a half-day of school for our regular *limudei kodesh* classes, we would ride the school bus home. That Sunday morning, our *rebbeim* told us that we would have the incredible *zechus* of meeting Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, who would be arriving in Cleveland later that day. The school had chartered buses to take us to and from Cleveland's Hopkins International Airport for the occasion. Of course, our *rebbeim* did a great job of hyping the event, and when Micha and I arrived home that day (with an official letter from the school), we excitedly shared the news of this field trip with our mother and father.

Our parents readily agreed to let us participate. After eating a quick lunch, our father drove us back to school (with some snacks our mother had prepared), and we eagerly boarded the chaperoned buses bound for the airport. I vividly recall that many of us were wearing our official blue HAC yarmulkes, and I'm sure that our *rebbeim* reminded us how important it was to

be on our best behavior in a public setting.

Situated on the shores of Lake Erie, Cleveland is known for its rapidly changing weather patterns, often referred to as the "lake effect." As our large group of students waited at the gate where Reb Yaakov's plane was supposed to arrive (20 years before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, this wasn't something that was limited to ticketed passengers), a tremendous wind and rainstorm developed. We soon received word that Reb Yaakov's flight (and I'm sure all incoming flights) would be delayed. We waited and ate our snacks, and our *rebbeim* probably worked diligently to keep us from running around the terminal.

After Reb Yaakov's flight was delayed several more times, the school made the

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decision for the buses to take us back to HAC. However, after the way our *rebbeim* had built up the chance to meet Reb Yaakov, many of the boys were intent on staying at the airport. I can't explain why, but a good number of them were ready to park themselves at the gate and wait, no matter how long his flight was delayed.

The school made the following compromise. Any boy who wished to stay could accompany one of the *rebbeim* to a

pay phone and call home. Those students whose parents agreed to let them remain at the airport could do so. Everyone else would call it a day and head back to HAC. My brother and I called our parents and were thrilled when they allowed us to stay. Our sizeable group was soon whittled down, and we sat at the gate waiting for Reb Yaakov.

Neither of us could remember exactly how long we waited. We remember that it was dark outside and that we were tired—and then suddenly word came that the weather had cleared up enough for the flight to land! We were immediately energized.

I remember our excitement as Reb Yaakov's plane landed, the terminal doors opened and the passengers began to disembark. But where was Reb Yaakov? Soon enough, after all the other passengers had gotten off the plane, we spotted a white-bearded man wearing a homburg, a coat and an enormous smile being wheeled down the jetway toward us. Excited to see the famous rabbi, we immediately crowded around him. To honor a man who so personified the Torah, one of our *rebbeim* started singing "*Se'u She'arim Rosheichem*," which is traditionally sung while dancing with the *sifrei Torah* on Simchas Torah, and we all joined in.

While we sang, clapped and danced around a beaming Reb Yaakov, we could not help but feel drawn to him. There was an aura about him that was very *zeidy*-like, loving and caring. I will always remember his smiling face as I approached him for a warm handshake. My brother Micha recalled taking in the scene from a short distance away, too shy to make his way into the circle to shake Reb Yaakov's hand.



HAC students listening attentively to Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky during his 1982 visit to Cleveland, Ohio

Seeing that he was about to miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, one of our *rebbeim*, the unforgettable Rabbi Calman Fishman, *z"l*, reached down and positioned Micha directly in front of Reb Yaakov to make sure he received a handshake as well. (Reb Yaakov would have been 91 years old at the time of his visit; he passed away in 1986 at the age of 95.)

We HAC students were fortunate to see Reb Yaakov one more time during his brief visit. At some point the following day, the boys gathered in the school's auditorium (which also served as a *shul* for the Young Israel of Cleveland). Reb Yaakov was introduced and escorted to the podium by our revered dean, Rabbi N. W. Dessler, *z"l*. Reb Yaakov must have spoken to us in Yiddish, and I am certain that one of the *rebbeim* translated his words into English. But neither my brother nor I have any memory of what was said. All we remember is sitting there transfixed, knowing we were in the presence of Torah greatness.

In shaking Reb Yaakov's hand, we had come into contact with a scion of Slabodka. Through that touch, we had physically connected, ever so briefly, with a living link in the glorious chain of Torah and *mussar* giants, *rabbanim* and *roshei yeshivah* of Lithuania. In lovingly taking hold of our young

hands, Reb Yaakov enabled us to grasp the hands of a millennium of proud and upright members of the vanished world of European Jewry.

Whenever I repeat any *divrei Torah* of Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, I think of this episode and of the brief but personal connection I was privileged to have with him thanks to the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland.

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Now that almost 40 years have elapsed since that memorable encounter, I find myself struck by the following realization. Each day, we have the potential to create meaningful experiences in the lives of others. Is there any way that the hard-working HAC staff realized that a field trip they quickly put together in 1982 would leave such a powerful impression on their

students? Could my parents have known that their decision to allow my brother and me to remain at the airport on that rainy November evening would provide us with such a positive and memorable experience? Could Reb Yaakov have imagined that his warm smile and gentle handshake would still be felt nearly four decades later?

Our daily decisions and interactions have the potential to powerfully affect the lives of others. The repercussions of our actions are infinite. After reconnecting with some of my elementary school *rebbeim* to reminisce about this indelible memory, I was hit with one final thought: I now find myself in a classroom setting, learning Torah with high school students in Memphis, Tennessee. I hope and pray that the memories they share with me in 40 years will be nothing but positive. ●

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