

Torah SPARKS

Harav Shimon Hakohen Shkop, *zt"l*

Marking his 80th *yahrtzeit* on 9 Cheshvan

On 9 Marcheshvan 5700, we lost Harav Shimon Yehudah Hakohen Shkop, *zt"l*, making this Thursday, November 7, his 80th *yahrtzeit*. Rav Shimon was one of the lights of the Lithuanian yeshivah world, becoming famous as a *Rebbi* in Telshe Yeshivah for having developed his own style of *lomdus*, halachic analysis, and eventually as the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Shaarei Torah, Grodno.

Let me introduce you to Rav Shimon as I “met” him.

It was the end of the *zman*, and we sat down for *bechinos*. Before we began, Harav Dovid Lifshitz, *zt"l*, asked us all two questions. First, “Did anyone not sleep at least eight hours last night?” And if you raised your hand, you were sent back to the dorm. Second, “Who missed breakfast?” The first time around, some hands went up. *Rebbi* gave those *talmidim* a few dollars to take to the cafeteria. By the end of the second *zman*, we all knew better.

As was his norm in *shiur* as well, Rav Dovid here was relaying to us a lesson from his own *Rebbi*, Rav Shimon.

A *talmid* had arrived at the yeshivah in Grodno after a three-day walk. He left with only a little bit of food, trying to manage with the kindness of any Jews he would meet along the way. He arrived ready for the *bechinah*, worried about the shame of not being accepted after all that effort and having to return home.

This *talmid* walked into the *Rosh Yeshivah*’s office — Rav Shimon Shkop’s kitchen. But Rav Shimon started the *bechinah*, “The first question is ... When was the last time you had a warm meal?” When the *talmid* answered that it had been three weeks, Rav Shimon apologized, “My wife is not home and I am not much of a cook, but I will do my best.” And he prepared the *talmid* a meal, with second helpings!

Now the *talmid* was nervous — the real *bechinah* would surely begin. The second question was, “When was the last time you slept on a bed?” He couldn’t remember. So Reb Shimon prepared a bed for him to sleep in. As the *talmid* later found out, it was the *Rosh Yeshivah*’s own.

A *bachur* who shows the determination that this one did didn’t need a *bechinah* to check his skills. Rav Shimon Shkop wanted such a *talmid* in his yeshivah.

By Rabbi Micha Berger

Biography

Rav Shimon Hakohen Shkop was born in Toretz, near Minsk, in Tishrei 5620 (1859). Biographies of *Gedolim* often speak of their skills at an early age. It is indicative of the message Rav Shimon passed on to his *talmidim* that his biographies not only mention young Shimon’s clear intellect; they emphasize his amazing diligence. Native intellectual ability is a gift from the Creator, but the *hasmadah*, the drive to learn, that is an accomplishment to record.

At age 12, Shimon precociously joined the yeshivah in nearby Mir for two years. When he was a bit older and his parents were ready to send him farther from home, he went to learn under the Netziv, the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Volozhin. Harav Chaim Soloveitchik (Reb Chaim Brisker), *zt"l*, who was only seven years older than him, was already running a popular *chaburah* that was analyzing the *Gemara* and *Rishonim* using what would come to be called the Brisker *derech*. Reb Shimon joined the *chaburah*, to become among the first *bachurim* exposed to the new *lomdus*.

Reb Shimon later gave two descriptions of life in Volozhin. On the one hand, he told of having to tie what was left of his shoes together with rags to make it through the Lithuanian winter — he lacked even the little money necessary to pay for shoe repairs. But he also frequently described this period as one of the happiest. When he and his son, Reb Moshe Mordechai, went to Volozhin, Rav Shimon told him, “See, my son, this is where I sat engrossed in Torah for six years, night and day, and this



R-L: Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, *zt"l*, in a Torah discussion with Harav Shimon Shkop, *zt"l*.

was the greatest joy I had in the world!" Given a chance to learn Torah, other matters were simply unimportant.

Reb Shimon Shkop was 21 when he married Leah Eidelwitz, in a *shidduch redt* by the Netziv. The bride's uncle was Harav Eliezer (Leizer) Gordon, *zt"l*. When Rav Leizer became the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Telshe in 5644 (1884), Reb Shimon was 24 and was taken on as a *Rebbi* there.

Rav Shimon adapted Rav Chaim Brisker's analytic approach to Talmud study into what *talmidim* started calling the Telshe *derech*. During his 18 years in Telshe, Rav Shimon's class attracted guests not only from the other *shiurim* but also visitors from other yeshivos eager to experience this new style of *lomdus*.

It was at Telshe that Rav Shimon grew to prominence, but he had four positions altogether. Rav Shimon left Telshe after 18 years to take a position as the Rav of Moltsh. The local yeshivah there had recently closed; Rav Shimon succeeded in bringing back some of the core students and reviving it, turning his position into a dual role of Rav and *Rosh Yeshivah*. In Bransk in 5667 (1907) Rav Shimon again assumed a dual role when he accepted an offer to become the *Av Beis Din* in Bransk and then opened a yeshivah there too. But both the community and the yeshivah dwindled when the fighting of World War I reached Bransk.

Meanwhile, *talmidim* trying to reach various yeshivos in Eastern Europe ended up stranded in Grodno because of their inability to cross the border. They organized a yeshivah themselves, run largely by *vaadim*, committees, of *bachurim*. They found a home in a local *beis medrash* and attracted a *Mashgiach Ruchani* in Harav Yoseif Leib Nandik, a product of the Novardok school of *mussar*. But they had no *Rosh Yeshivah*. When fighting broke out between the Soviet Union and Poland, many fled, which for a yeshivah that existed so informally, threatened its survival.

Harav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky, *zt"l*, convinced Rav Shimon Shkop to take its helm to save the yeshivah. In 5686 (1925/6) the people of Perstat, a suburb of Grodno, appointed Rav Shimon their Rav, and yet again he returned to the dual role of both town Rav and *Rosh Yeshivah*. Rav Shimon remained *Rosh Yeshivah* in Grodno until his death at the onset of World War II, aside from a brief time spent in New York.

In 5689 (1928) Rav Shimon left

Grodno for a fundraising trip to the United States on behalf of the yeshivah. While there, Rabbi Dov Revel invited him to become *Rosh Yeshivah* of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan. Rav Shimon accepted, as he dreamed of following in Harav Yisrael Salanter's footsteps. Teaching Torah and training Rabbanim for the largely non-observant atmosphere of American was much like Rav Yisrael's work to spread Torah in Prussia and Paris.

He took up the position in the spring of 1929, but he returned to Grodno after less than a year at the post. Rav Chaim Ozer and the Chofetz Chaim wrote him describing how desperately the yeshivah in Grodno needed him back. According to the family he dropped the plan because Rebbetzin Leah was afraid to risk their children's spiritual development in the atmosphere of New York of that era.

Rav Shimon Shkop's magnum opus was *Shaarei Yosher*. In it, he discusses complex topics that touch on the foundations of the *halachah's* legal thought, matters of doubt resolution, *chazakos* — presumption, testimony and the like. Rav Shimon also wrote other works that were published posthumously — *Maareches Hakinyanim*, on the laws of acquisition, as well as collections of *chiddushim* on several *masechtos*.

It was 7 MarCheshvan 5700/October 22, 1939. The Russian army was poised to invade Grodno as World War II heated up. Rav Shimon told his students to flee to the center of Lithuanian Jewry, Vilna, and the yeshivah closed. He himself was not healthy enough to flee. Two days later, 9 MarCheshvan, Rav Shimon Shkop passed away.

Yehi zichro baruch.

Derech Halimud: Don't Stop At 'Vos?' — Ask 'Fahr Vos?'

Rav Shimon was one of the first *talmidim* to learn the Brisker *derech*. However, when teaching his own *talmidim*, he employed a different style of *lomdus*.

An epigram you commonly hear when people want to summarize the difference between the two approaches is, "In Brisk they ask 'Vos?' — What? In Telshe they ask 'Fahr Vos?' — Why?" But the difference really goes one level deeper.

If one were to ask a Brisker what "*baalus* — property" means, he would point to the *halachos* of acquisition and sale, of theft and inheritance, and so on. Property is defined by the sum total of the *dinim* of ownership. In Rav Chaim Brisker's worldview, *halachah* is

the foundational stratum of reality. He would never ask "Why?" about a *halachah* because *halachah* is the reason for everything else.

Rav Shimon gives a different answer (*Shaarei Yosher*, opening of *Shaar* 5). He explains that before we were even given a *halachah* at Sinai, there was a legal and moral concept of property. *Halachah* doesn't replace our definition of ownership. Rather, it gives us a holier way to relate to a natural concept that is built into human experience.

The difference is likely because of Rav Shimon Shkop's *mussar*-based *hashkafah*. To Rav Shimon, the purpose of Torah is to make us better people, to refine our *tzelem Elokim*. He therefore wouldn't try to analyze *halachah* divorced from the terms of people's experience. He would be thinking of the question of how the Jew is impacted by the experience of following the *din* in question.

Hashkafah: Our Greatest Desire Would Be to Benefit Others

Because Rav Shimon's *derech* is tied to the question of "Why?", it was natural that he introduced *Shaarei Yosher* with an essay about "the big picture" — what is the meaning of life and how does Torah help us achieve it? He wouldn't discuss *dinim* without giving its context.

To Rav Shimon Shkop, Hashem "created us in His image and in the likeness of His structure, and planted eternal life within us" — *Birchos HaTorah's* description of the Torah — "so that our greatest desire would be to benefit others." After all, Hashem couldn't have created the universe for His own needs; He has no needs. Hashem created it in order to have beings upon whom He could bestow His goodness. "*Vehalachta bidrachav* — You shall go in His ways," living to benefit others. "*Kedoshim tihyu* — Be holy for I am holy" — consecrating oneself to benefit others, just as Hashem does.

Yes, the *Midrash* and Ramban famously talk about "*kedoshim tihyu*" being a command that "*perushim tihyu* — you shall keep separate." But Hashem Himself doesn't need to stay apart from things to be holy. This is not the definition of *kedushah* or emulating Hashem's *kedushah*. We people, who can be distracted, fulfill the *mitzvah* of being holy by staying apart from those things that could detour our journey to be available to benefit others. And if we do so, then any rest, entertainment or spiritual activity we do ends up not just being for our-

selves, but part of that *kedushah* to better provide good to others.

Rav Shimon doesn't take this to mean living selflessly. He proves this from *halachos* like the case of two people who are in the desert, one of whom has water, but only enough for himself. Rabi Akiva rules the person should keep the water.

To Rav Shimon, the Torah is about generosity, and generosity comes from extending, not denying, the self. A parent who "sacrifices" to get something for their children is not acting out of real self-denial, but because they see themselves in their children and we have a natural willingness to give to that extended self.

As Rav Shimon himself puts it, "The entire '*ani*' of a coarse and lowly person is restricted only to his substance and body. Above him is someone who feels that his '*ani*' is a synthesis of body and soul. And above him is someone who can include in his '*ani*' all of his household and family. Someone who goes according to the way of the Torah, his '*ani*' includes the whole Jewish People, since in truth every Jewish person is only like a limb of the body of the nation of Israel. In this [progression] there are more levels for a fully developed person, one can ingrain in his soul the feeling that the entire world is his '*ani*,' and he himself is only one small limb of all of Creation. Then, his self-love helps him love the entire Jewish people and all of Creation."

The size of a *neshamah* is the number of people they think of when they say "*ani* — I."

The world lost a truly great soul 80 years ago. Rav Shimon hakohen Shkop also taught numerous *talmidim* who became leaders in their own right — including my *Rebbi*, Harav Dovid Lifshitz; Harav Elchonon Wasserman, *Hy"d*; Harav Chaim Shmuelevitz; Harav Yisrael Zev Gustman; Harav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman of Ponevez and Harav Isser Yehudah Unterman, *zecher tzaddikim livrachah*.

It is upon us to ensure Rav Shimon's *derech halimud* and *derech hachaim* continue. ■

There is much more information on Rav Shimon's worldview as described in his introduction to Shaarei Yosher, in Rabbi Berger's book, Widen Your Tent: Thoughts on Life, Integrity & Joy (Mosaica Press, 2019). The historical information in this article was taken primarily from anonymous notes printed in Sefer Hayovel, published in honor of the 50th anniversary of Rav Shimon Hakohen Shkop's arrival at Telshe.