





'MY SHVER IS WATCHING ME'

BY **RAFOEL HOFFMAN**

DR. Robert (Moshe Yaakov) Goldschmidt

has served as vice president and dean of students for Touro College for nearly 40 years. His early years included the diverse experiences of Communist Romania, Paris of the 1950s, and Yeshivah Torah Vodaath of the 1960s and '70s. In addition to his impressive educational and professional accomplishments, Dr. Goldschmidt enjoyed an especially close relationship with his esteemed father-in-law, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, *zt"l*.



TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOUR FAMILY BACKGROUND AND YOUR EARLY YEARS IN ROMANIA.

My parents, *a"h*, were of Ashkenazi-Hungarian background and lived in a region of Romania that was ethnically German, called Siebenburgen.

My mother's maiden name was Reich and she was a granddaughter of Rav Koppel Reich, *zt"l*, who was Rav of Budapest for more than 30 years, and previously in several other towns in Czechoslovakia. He was a *talmid* of the Ksav Sofer and in addition to his *rabbanus* was also very involved in *klal* affairs. In fact, in his later years, as an honorary measure, the government awarded him a seat in the Upper House of the Austro-Hungarian Parliament. His four sons all became Rabbanim. One of them, Reb Moshe, my mother's father, served in a town called Medias, where my family lived after the war.

In terms of their experience, once the war started, my parents were fortunate in that their region was never deported to concentration camps. They were sent to hard labor camps locally, and certainly did not have a *Gan Eden* but, relatively speaking, were better off than others.

Before the war, my father had been a very successful businessman, and when my parents married after the war, he decided to remain in Romania, with the hope of reclaiming what he had once had. Unfortunately, the Communists took over two years later and nationalized all private businesses. Beyond that, the borders were closed and there was no way to emigrate, so we had no choice but to stay in Romania for the next 12 years.

My father and my mother, throughout their lives, demonstrated tremendous *mesirus nefesh* for their children — my brother Avraham Tzvi (Jacques) and me. Like all the other children in this communist society, we had to attend the public school. However, my parents scraped together funds to pay for a *melamed* to teach us every afternoon in a side room in the town's shul, together with about eight or 10 other boys. We used to call him by the German title, *Herr Lehrer*.

HOW DID YOU GET TO PARIS AND WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE THERE?

In 1958, there was a period of liberalization in Romania and people were allowed to apply for exit visas. My parents managed to obtain papers and they were given notice that we had



Gathering of *Gedolim* at Goldschmidt wedding: (R-L) Harav Gedaliah Schorr, Harav Moshe Feinstein, Harav Shneur Kotler, *ybl"c*, the *chassan*, Rabbi Moshe Sherer, and Harav Nochum Mordechai Perlow of Novominsk, *zt"l*.



With Rabbi Aaron Braun, *z"l*.

two weeks to leave the country.

We traveled by train to Vienna with four or five valises. Everything else had to be left behind. Three months later, we set out for Paris, where my father had a close cousin of means, who was able to arrange entry visas for us.

Jewish life in Paris is far more developed today than it was then. My brother and I attended a local day school before going away to Yeshiva Chachmei Tzorfais in Aix-les-Bains.

I remember, for my bar mitzvah, I received a new suit, and our cousin gave me a watch. For the *kiddush*, there were a couple of trays of sponge cake, a few plates of herring — that

was it. I have told my children and grandchildren that without all the bells and whistles of today's *simchos*, I didn't feel the least bit deprived and was quite happy to have a new suit and a new watch. My parents made tremendous sacrifices for my brother and me, disregarding their personal needs.

WHO WERE YOUR REBBEIM IN CHACHMEI TZORFAS IN AIX-LES-BAINS AND WHAT WAS THE YESHIVAH LIKE?

It was a relatively small yeshivah then, perhaps 150 *talmidim*, with an emphasis on *mus-sar*. I was one of the younger boys. The *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Chaim Yitzchak Chaikin, *zt"l*,

already elderly at the time, was a *talmid* of the Chofetz Chaim in Radin. There was another *rebbe*, Rav Eliyahu Elyovics, who was a tall person with a flowing beard, and fit the picture of an old-world *talmid chacham* — with one interesting twist. The yeshivah was outside of town and up a big hill. Every day, Rav Elyovics drove up from his home in the town on a big powerful motorcycle. He didn't have the slightest compunction about it; it was just the easiest way for him to get around.

It was a wonderful yeshivah. Most *talmidim*, then, were not from France. Quite a few *bachurim* were Sephardim from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, whose families had moved to France in the early 1960s. Others were from Belgium and the rest from various parts of France.

Now it's common for *bachurim* to visit home relatively often. Aix-les-Bains was about five or six hours by train from Paris and we only went home for Sukkos and Pesach.

There was a tremendous emphasis on something that was also a focus later in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath and something that my *shver* spoke about persistently. That is, the responsibility to conduct oneself always in a way that will make a *kiddush Hashem* in all situations and settings.

We had to take certain French state exams and the testing center that we were assigned to was a Catholic school in a nearby town. We were lectured that we were going to a non-Jewish school and that we had a tremendous *achrayus* to conduct ourselves properly. As I recall, Rav Yitzchak Weill, who is presently the *Rosh Yeshivah*, spoke to us. His message was to remember that our behavior would reflect not only on us as individuals, but on the religious Jewish community as a whole.

HOW DID YOU COME TO TORAH VODAATH? WHAT WAS THE ATMOSPHERE LIKE AND WHICH REBBEIM HAD THE GREATEST INFLUENCE ON YOU?

In the winter of 1962, my parents moved to America. It was not easy for them. They were not so young and did not speak English well. My father had built up a small business in Paris, but to sell it off in parts was not worth too much. But, they chose to move to America because they felt that there would be much greater opportunities for a proper *chinuch* for their children, in line with their motto, "*Tzu G-tt und tzu Leute.*"

The old Skulener Rebbe, *zt"l*, who at the time lived in Crown Heights, knew my mother's family from Romania, and my parents

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went to ask him where they should send us to yeshivah. Knowing well the background of our family, he recommended Torah Vodaath.

Now, in terms of my age, I should have entered the high school. The problem was that I didn't speak English. Fortunately, I am adept at languages and, after five months back in elementary school, I was able to join grade level 10.

I learned in the yeshivah from 1963 until 1974. In those days, Torah Vodaath had Litvaks, Chassidim, boys from South America, from Vienna, all types. It was open to everyone and the yeshivah had a tremendous heart. I don't think it had its equal then or today. It wasn't limited to any particular group, it was unique, it was a *Klal Yisrael* yeshivah.

Embracing all sorts of Yidden, the yeshivah produced many Rabbanim and *Roshei Yeshivah* serving today in many *mosdos*. It also formed thousands of *ehrlliche baalei batim*. The yeshivah created *bnei Torah* who became professionals and are examples of *kiddush*

Hashem in the workplace.

An unfortunate turn of events gave us an additional appreciation for what Yeshiva Torah Vodaath was willing to do for *Klal Yisrael*. Two years after we came to the U.S., my father was *niftar*. My mother had to take a job in a sweater factory and the financial situation was very tight. From that time on, she never received a single tuition bill from the yeshivah, not even for summers in Camp Mesivta.

I was very close to Rav Nesanel Quinn, *zt"l*, who was such a down-to-earth and unassuming person. I remember one year in camp, he was out on a boat with us, with his sleeves rolled up, and he announced, "Boys, now we are going to row." With that, he started rowing together with us with all of his strength.

I had the special *zechus* to have Rav Avraham Pam, *zt"l*, as a *rebbe*, both in my senior year in high school and in the *beis medrash*. He was not just a *rebbe* who said *shiur*. It was a relationship for life. At any stage, even after one left yeshivah, one could turn to him with questions about life issues.

We did discover one relative whom we had in America, who was the executive director of Torah Vodaath, Rabbi Aaron Braun, *z"l*. We were distant cousins, but he took a serious interest in our family's welfare and had a tremendous influence on us. He became not only my *shadchan*, but also made *shidduchim* for our children, Suri and Shrage.

I owe Yeshiva Torah Vodaath a tremendous debt; it was an exceptional *makom Torah*, with exceptional *rebbeim*, with an amazing sense of *achdus*, and a huge heart.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR SHVER, RABBI MOSHE SHERER, AND HIS INFLUENCE ON YOU.

For many years, my *shver* taught a homiletics class in Torah Vodaath at eight in the



In conversation.

morning. He had a record book of the students who attended. When my *shidduch* to my wife Elky was suggested, he consulted his book, but had potential reservations in that he saw that I had not participated in the class. Fortunately, Rav Gedaliah Schorr, *zt"l*, the *Rosh Yeshivah* at that time, told him that it was worth looking into anyway.

I was very close to my *shver* and learned a great deal from him. One particular *zechus* that we had was that, from the time we were married and for the next 27 years, we never made a *Seder* of our own. My wife and I and our children were always at his *Seder* table. I still remember the emotionally charged very last *Seder* we attended, two months before his *petirah*.

My *shver* taught me the importance of always presenting oneself with *emes* and total integrity in all aspects of life. Another major lesson he taught me was the responsibility, especially of professionals, to live a *klal*-oriented life, to provide not only for one's family, but to constantly seek to do for the *klal*.

My *shver* was the premier spokesman for and representative of *Klal Yisrael*. He repeated many times at Agudah dinners that in his youth, there was a certain Reform leader who described the Agudah as a "sickly weed." My *shver* would retort with great pride: "Look how this weed has grown." He earned standing and prestige for the *frum* community in the United States, which I think was a tremendous accomplishment.

He always said if one is going to be successful, one must present oneself professionally, and stressed the importance of effective communication. "Don't be a *shlepper*," he used to say. "If you are going to speak in public, you must be well prepared."

He had 10 rules for public speaking. One was the "three Bs": be prepared, be sincere and be brief. Another of his sayings was that a good speech is like baking a cake — it needs a lot of shortening.

Our family misses him greatly and the void is felt in *Klal Yisrael*.

HOW DID YOU COME TO TOURO AND HOW HAS THE SCHOOL CHANGED SINCE YOUR ARRIVAL?

In 1974, I had been working as a researcher at New York University, when I was introduced to Dr. Bernard Lander, a man with tremendous heart who wanted to serve *Klal Yisrael*. I began as an instructor at his campus in Manhattan and two years later became dean of students. Touro was then a small school; today it is a major national institution of higher education.



At a Touro dinner with President Lander, *z"l*.



Dean Goldschmidt, 7 years old, in Medias, Romania. To his right is his brother Avraham Tzvi (Jacques) Goldschmidt.

In 1976, I approached Dr. Lander about the possibility of opening a program in Brooklyn geared to the *parnassah* needs of the *frum* community. The following fall, we opened the Flatbush Program with 14 men and two years later started our first class for women with 10 students. We offered three bachelor's degrees in accounting, computer science, and management.

Since then, the Flatbush Program, now

the Lander College in Flatbush, has produced more than 8,000 graduates, who are supporting Torah families in dignity. We have an enrollment of 900 students each semester and now offer more than 20 majors.

Touro in Flatbush has grown, but the focus has remained unchanged. Our goal is to provide a professional education in an environment where *frum* men and women feel comfortable and their *hashkafos* are supported, not threatened. When we first opened, Dr. Lander said that men's classes should only be at night, so that *bachurim* can remain in *yeshivah* during the day. We have never changed that.

The goal has been, and remains, to provide students with the education and credentials to progress professionally, not as a goal unto itself, but rather as a means to provide appropriately for their families.

I always say that we are not here to sell degrees. Integrity is not only for the *beis medrash*. *Emes* means that a person is representing himself honestly and truthfully in all ways and in all spheres of life. If I am presenting myself as a C.P.A., I have to be able to prepare your taxes properly. If I am a speech therapist or a physical therapist I have to be able to treat you properly. If not, it constitutes *geneivas daas* and it fails the test of *emes*.

I have tremendous *nachas* from what we have accomplished at our school in Flatbush. In many ways it is Touro's crown jewel. It has made a tremendous impact on the *frum* community.

I try my best to be mindful of my responsibility to the *klal*. I always say [pointing to a picture of Rabbi Sherer on the shelf] that my *shver* is watching me; he is looking over my shoulder. On the other side [pointing to a photo on the opposite side of the room], I have Rav Pam's photo and I am being watched. The question is: What am I doing? And am I doing it with *ehrllichkeit*? ■