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LEARNING WITH THE RAV: LEARNING FROM THE RAV

More than a year after his passing, the articles concerning the legacy (or more properly legacies) of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik continue to multiply. While most, if not all, have tended to emphasize the impact of the personality of the Rav, or the richness and originality of his thought, few have dealt with the unique features of the Rav's approach to the study and teaching of Talmud. Despite the undisputed influence of the Rav as a philosophical thinker and outstanding leader in the renaissance of American Orthodox Jewry, the Rav's ultimate authority stemmed from his Talmudic mastery and halakhic authority. My intent here is to focus on the Rav as "*rebbe*" in the classical sense, as Talmudic expositor par excellence, master of "*lomdus*," dedicated advocate of the *Brisker derekh* and creator of countless "*hiddushei Torah*." Because there is already a new generation "who did not know of Joseph," who were never exposed firsthand to the Rav's brilliance and *gadlut*, such an account is all the more necessary.

In attempting to address the unique facets in the Rav's approach to *lomdus*, I base my comments largely on personal experiences during the sixties, when I had the privilege of studying with the Rav at Yeshiva. Recognizing the great gap in *lomdus* between ourselves and the Rav, we in the *shiur* could not help but be somewhat amazed at his presence among us and the dedication he demonstrated in traveling from Boston to New York on a weekly basis. In a very real sense, the transmittal of Torah—the *mesora*—was the Rav's defining purpose in life and it was through the *shiur* that this purpose was realized. The Rav's search for "*amita shel Torah*"—for a deep and profound understanding of the *Torah she-Be'al Pe*, and the transmission of this Torah—was of the intensity of an issue of life and death.¹ The excitement of discovery, the search for the truth at its profoundest level, and the encounter with an intellect both open to *hiddush* yet rooted in *mesora*, gave the *shiur* an urgency and intensity unparalleled as a Torah learning experience, for which I will always be grateful.

THE LAMDAN AND THE MELAMED

As is well known, the Rav liked to call himself a “*melamed*,” a teacher, which, he pointed out, is an appellation by which the Almighty Himself is known: “*HaMelamed Torah le-am Yisrael*.” The Rav’s genius as a *melamed*, as expositor and mentor, in some ways rivalled his genius for interpretation and innovation. Because so much of what we, the *talmidim* of the Rav, know of the Rav’s teaching and Torah, derives from the Rav’s public and regular *shiurim*, (as opposed to his writings, which have had less exposure), it is impossible to totally separate the two great capacities of the Rav—*lamdan* and the *melamed*.

The Rav’s *shiur* was an unforgettable intellectual and spiritual experience. It was, first of all, a *shiur* in every sense of the word, not a college class or professorial lecture. The Rav’s fire was the fire of Sinai; no *esh zara*, no alien flames, burned upon his altar of Torah. The Rav’s one concession to the changing American scene was a willingness to change the language of instruction from Yiddish to English,² because some *talmidim* knew little Yiddish. In all other respects, the *shiurim*, which could easily run from five to six hours daily, three days a week, were modeled after those offered in all *yeshivot*, but were offered with the Rav’s unique dynamism, clarity and special pedagogical approach.

As in many other matters, the Rav seemed to base his unique approach to the teaching of Torah on principles of Rambam.³ Firstly, Rambam (in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, Chapter I) incorporates within a single commandment the obligation to teach Torah (*le-lamed*) and the obligation to learn Torah (*li-lmod*). Indeed, the *primary* obligation according to Rambam is that of teaching Torah—“*Ve-limadtem otam et beneikhem*.” The obligation of learning Torah is posited by Rambam as a self-instructional experience: “For, just as one is commanded to teach his son, so one is commanded to teach himself” (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* I, 4).

Cognizant of this linkage, the Rav organized his *shiur* as an exercise wherein we, the *talmidim*, were invited to share in the Rav’s experience of “teaching himself,” as it were, the *sugya* or halakhic text to be mastered, with the learning and teaching experience merging as one. Thus, the Rav would force himself to approach a *sugya* as if for the first time,⁴ developing with us the various opinions, problems and possibilities embedded in the text, compelling us to confront with him the difficulties of various approaches, sharing with him in the resolution of these problems.

In the fourth chapter of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, Rambam further spells out another principle of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship. Maimon-

ides places upon the *rebbe* not only the responsibility of transmitting Torah knowledge, but also of assuring the seriousness and diligence of the *talmid* in mastering the details of the *shiur*. “Therefore, the *rav*, the master, is never to behave frivolously before the *talmidim*, not to eat and drink before them, so that they should remain in awe of him, so they may learn from him quickly.” Indeed, the master is enjoined not only to separate himself, but also to publicly admonish *talmidim* who do not devote themselves to Torah with sufficient seriousness.

The Rav took these strictures of Rambam seriously in the demands he made on his *talmidim* and in his personal awareness of the responsibilities placed upon him as an ultimate source of halakhic authority for so many of his contemporaries. The great esteem, awe, and simple fear which the *talmidim* felt in the presence of the Rav reflected the demands which the Rav himself made on us and mostly on himself. “The Lonely Man of Faith,” a title the Rav chose for his marvelous essay concerning the problems of modernity, was mistakenly taken by many of us to describe the Rav himself. He was indeed not truly lonely, but singular and awesome.

Maimonides (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, IV,6), based on several examples in the Talmud, allows the master to purposely mislead his students by questions or actions in order to sharpen their sensitivity and thinking. On at least one occasion, the Rav candidly admitted to the *shiur* that he had indeed followed this dictum of Rambam in purposely presenting an inapt halakhic comparison. He then used the occasion as a springboard for deeper investigation of the issues involved.

In reality, this principle of Rambam is also essential in defining the *rebbe-talmid* relationship, for it illustrates that the *rebbe* must develop the skills of *talmidim* and not content himself with merely broadening their knowledge base. Indeed, the Rav’s objective of developing his students’ talmudic skills was always pre-eminent in his *shiurim*. The Rav’s particular didactic methodology, starting from the beginning of a *sugya* and working it through as if from scratch, was at once dedicated to “*amita shel Torah*”—and yet somewhat deceptive. The Rav was, of course, always highly prepared for his seemingly initial examination of the *sugya*. His “*hasmada*” and “*ameilus baTorah*” were legendary; his *bekiut* was amazing. That the Rav could approach a *sugya* from a fresh vantage point was an enormous act of will.

The contribution to the skills of each *talmid* from this seeming deception was immense. Yet in truth, there was no deception; the process we observed and participated in was an authentic learning experience for both the *talmidim* and the Rav himself. As Rambam notes at

the end of the fifth chapter of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, students serve as kindling to set ablaze the imagination and inspiration of the master, drawing forth from the *rav* “*hokhma mefoara*,” splendid wisdom. So, too, the Rav’s interaction with the *talmidim* allowed him and required him to define and refine the concepts which would illuminate the text at hand.

To some extent, if the Rav sought to teach us by teaching himself, he himself became a member of the *shiur* and he was at once his own most brilliant student and merciless critic. After presenting a masterful analysis in which he seemed to have resolved all the problems he had raised, the Rav himself would often raise serious objections which had been overlooked by all those present. He valued “*amita shel Torah*” above all else and subjected his own Torah to this standard at all times. Where others might have been quite satisfied with an elegant resolution of a problematic *shita* or halakhic opinion, the Rav would return to the problem at a later date, bringing new ideas to bear, questioning, contesting, refuting, disputing and reformulating a previous day’s *shiur*. The desire for “*amita shel Torah*” which the Rav inspired in his *shiur* was so intense that those rare occasions when he would pronounce a *hiddush* “*amita shel Torah*” were marked with profound satisfaction.

Towards the end of the *shiur*, the Rav, the consummate pedagogue, would often summarize succinctly the day’s discussions: “What did we learn today?” In other *shiurim*, such a question might be a signal to begin to put away one’s books for another day. The Rav saw the need to summarize one’s conclusions as another challenge. The Rav’s review sometimes took on a life of its own, changing or recasting the *shiur* once again, clarifying issues which might have been left ambiguous or unclear. After the *shiur* was completed, the Rav would, of course, remain for further questions and discussions.

In retrospect, it is clear that the very dynamism of the Rav’s thinking can pose special problems. Those seeking to understand the Rav’s Torah on a particular *sugya* and those seeking to reconstruct the Rav’s teachings from notes taken by dedicated *talmidim* are confronted by the nature of the Rav’s didactic approach, his willingness to explore new approaches, his readiness to refine and redefine. The Rav’s public lectures, where he more often seemed to provide conclusions, had their own educational objectives (see below), and may not necessarily represent his definitive view on a particular matter. As a consequence, establishing what the Rav actually maintained on a particular *sugya* is often a difficult task.

The Rav often repeated a family maxim which reflected his atti-

tude toward publishing Torah. According to this dictum, “Not everything that one thinks, should one say; not everything that one says, should one write, and not everything that one writes,” the Rav would add with a smile, “should one publish.” In this, as in other matters, the Rav followed the tradition of Rav Chaim, *zt”l*, whose *hiddushim* were published posthumously. The Rav was very reluctant to publish his *hiddushei Torah*, and much of what appears in print in his name are distillations of *shiurim* reconstructed from notes. The nature of note-taking, even if done well, however, tends to reduce a *shiur* to its bare bones—*heftsa*, *gavra*, *ma’ase*, *halot*, etc., leaving out the flesh and blood. The effort to convey the Rav’s teachings is an intellectual and spiritual undertaking of the highest order. The task itself is a daunting one, which runs the danger of reducing the Rav to the dimensions of the *talmid*. Let the reader of works ascribed to the Rav recognize, in the words of the *kohen gadol* on *Yom haKippurim*, that “*Yoter mi-ma she-karanu ketuvim kan*”—“More than we have read is written here.”⁵ The Rav’s Torah, in its splendid variety and multi-dimensionality, remains largely, as he wished, a *Torah she-Be’al Pe*, rather than a *Torah she-bi-Khtav*.

Despite all the above, it would nevertheless be wrong to assert that the Rav’s Torah has not been properly transmitted or conveyed merely because the Rav’s conclusions in a particular *sugya* are ambiguous. The Rav taught that *hatan Bereishit* was greater than *hatan Torah*,⁶ and that the purpose of a *siyyum* was to mark one’s ability to start anew with greater wisdom. The Rav’s approach to opening up a *sugya*, explaining a *Rambam*, defining a *mahloket*, may be ultimately more important than the particular fashion in which he resolved individual problems in a definitive manner. Like Rashi (as quoted by Rashbam at the beginning of *VaYeshev*), the Rav viewed Torah as an unending process. To understand the Rav, therefore, we must understand his unique approach to learning, rather than merely reflecting on his conclusions; his “*hava amina*” is crucial even when we may never be sure of his “*maskana*.”

HIDDUSH AND MESORA

Two underlying and seemingly contradictory impulses are apparent in the Rav’s approach to learning (and indeed in his very persona): on one hand, a search for *hiddush*, and on the other, a scrupulous devotion to *mesora*, to that which has been imparted. The Rav’s individual Torah

legacy, derived largely from his sainted father and grandfather, Rav Moshe and Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, *zikhronam li-vrakha*, followed a *derekh* which at the time of its initial adoption revolutionized Torah learning. The Rav viewed himself as a link in this chain of *mesora* and adopted the “*Brisker derekh*” in his general approach to *lomdus*.

Before Rav Chaim, the Rav often commented, *lomdus* was seen as an attempt to reconcile contradictions between differing texts, to resolve apparent discrepancies between opinions. The *Brisker derekh* redirected the focus of attention from these apparent contradictions in texts, to the *a priori* questions of structure and relationship which provide the conceptual underpinnings of a *sugya* or text. In this methodology, a *mahloket* is analyzed in terms of fundamental conceptual differences rather than the particular application at hand. Given a proper orientation regarding the abstract or conceptual basis of an opinion or position cited in a text, apparent contradictions may indeed be resolved, but the ultimate end is the insight gained into a proper conceptual formulation.

With its emphasis on abstract reasoning, the *Brisker derekh* places major emphasis on proper definition, structure and relationships, and the application of universal principles (such as *da'at*, *kavana*, *li-shma*, and *ba'alut*) to particular situations. The role of the *lamdan* is to organize and understand the *sugya* as it relates to the general concepts, and to explore both the particular situation and the application of universal principles to the *sugya* being studied.

Under this definition of *lomdus*, the goal of the *lamdan* is not so much to resolve *setirot*, contradictions, but rather to pose *hakirot*, potential conceptual models with which to better understand and define the *halakha* or *sugya* in question. The *setira* is thus transformed into a tool whereby the *hakira* may be resolved. Whereas classical *lomdus* before Rav Chaim concentrated on the *setira* and sought to resolve the *setira* in a variety of fashions, the *Brisker derekh* is dedicated to the *hakira*, the investigation of potential conceptual models.

The Rav was, of course, the master of the *hakira*, with an amazing ability to delineate a wide variety of conceptual possibilities. Equally, however, he maintained that the true *lamdan* must be scrupulously careful concerning the proper understanding of text and almost pedantic in pursuing the consistency or contradiction of opinions as a tool to clarify and classify *shitot*. In the Rav's methodology, the skills of classical *lomdus* were an intrinsic component of the true *lamdan's* capabilities.

The *Brisker derekh*, in essence, seeks to analyze particular halakhic or textual problems in a conceptual framework. The framework itself is the given, its definitions, axioms and internal relationships largely devel-

oped by Rav Chaim and elaborated upon by Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, Rav Velvel Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, and others. In formulating the *Brisker derekh*, Rav Chaim created, in the Rav's description in *Ish haHalakha*, the framework in which the world of talmudic thought can be analyzed and categorized, and in which the universe itself is to be perceived.

The Rav's personal *mesora*, his legacy of Torah from his distinguished forebears, played an essential role in his approach to any given talmudic or halakhic problem. This *mesora* sometimes expressed itself explicitly in terms of the Rav's direct exposition of an analysis which he had received from his father or grandfather. This analysis then served as the starting point of the Rav's own analysis, bringing proofs to the *Brisker* position, raising problems involved and suggesting possible alternative resolutions.

In some *shiurim*, the Rav would turn to the classical *Brisker* canon (of which he was a master) for a paradigm to use to resolve a problem which had not been directly addressed by Rav Chaim or his father, *zt"l*. In these instances, the *talmidim* would be exposed to a classic *Brisker hakira* in one *sugya*, and the Rav would then apply the *hakira* to the material at hand. In this way, the Rav combined his vast creative talent with the power of his *mesora*.

In all *shiurim*, the structural framework of analysis remained as formulated by Rav Chaim, *zt"l*. The Rav's commitment was to extend this analysis to areas and problems not previously addressed and to explore alternative definitions and categorizations within the overall *Brisker* framework.

The Rav took great pride in the *mesora* he received from his father and grandfather. A maxim which he utilized on a number of occasions, "In order to be a *gadol*, you have to grow up among *gedolim*," reflected more than family pride. The Rav's aspirations in Torah, his commitment to "*amita shel Torah*," and the unrelenting demands for excellence and intellectual honesty which he maintained for himself and others had been inculcated in him from his childhood on.⁷ On an intellectual level, the Rav had an innate sense concerning the internal logic of halakha against which he measured potential approaches, rejecting some as absurd and pursuing others as potentially rewarding. This intuition, as well as an ability to discover interesting problems within the seemingly routine, were also part of his special heritage. Even his commitment to *hiddush* can be traced to his personal *mesora*, which was a *derekh* which revolutionized Torah learning throughout the world.

While we were in the *shiur*, rumor had it that the Rav had inherited from his father Rav Chaim's notes and *hiddushim* on many *ma-*

sekhtot. Indeed, on one occasion, the Rav brought to the *shiur* a copy of Rav Chaim's *hiddushim* on the *sugya* being learned. The Rav would also quote personal family anecdotes, which illustrated the *hashkafa* of *gedolei Yisrael* on particular issues. Rav Chaim, according to the Rav, was a "*mahmir* on *pikuah nefesh*," scrupulously careful regarding any threat to human life, and consequently was more lenient when human life might be at risk. On the other hand, with regard to the permissibility of risking one's own life to save another, the Rav reported how Rav Chaim directed family members to minister to the severely ill during a diphtheria epidemic, although doing so involved risk of contracting the disease. Based on his reading of *Rambam*,⁸ Rav Chaim felt that halakha placed a special responsibility for *pikuah nefesh* on *gedolei Yisrael*.

The Rav also highly esteemed the role of *mesora* in halakhic decision-making, *pesak halakha*. In the midst of a *shiur* in *Nidda*, the Rav once reported to us a *kabbala* which Rav Chaim had received in the name of the Gaon of Vilna regarding the proper *shiur* (measurement) of a *gris*, the minimum measure for *tumat ketamim* (menstrual stains). This *gris* was the size of a specific Polish coin, which was between the size of a nickel and a quarter. On another occasion, the Rav addressed the question of the *tekhelet* which had been introduced in the last century by the Radziner Rebbe. The Bet haLevi had rejected the *tekhelet* because it lacked a *mesora* of halakhic practice to verify it, and no other halakhic evidence could substitute for this *mesora*.⁹

In matters of halakha, the Rav was guided not only by a technical mastery of the various *shitot* regarding a particular issue, but also by an intuitive sense of *pesak*, which motivated him in organizing the various *shitot* of *poskim*. With regard to *minhagim*, his special family inheritance often determined his personal practice. (This would not always determine his *pesak* for others, however, which would weigh other *shitot* and common practice.)

The Rav's desire to apply the *Brisker derekh* to areas which had not been previously addressed extended also to *minhagei Yisrael* as described by *poskim*. Just as the Vilna Gaon sought talmudic and midrashic sources for the *minhagim* cited by *Shulhan Arukh*, the Rav would analyze *minhagim* along the lines of the *Brisker derekh*. The Rav was particularly interested in *minhagei tefilla* and the various *nusha'ot* of *tefilla*, examining the differences between their halakhic and theological implications.

One of the unique aspects of the Rav's Torah was its dedication to the unity of Torah, in his attempt to apply a uniform methodology to *kol haTorah kula*. His view of Torah was not fragmented but unified,

drawing a principle of *lomdus* from one area to illuminate another. Instead of restricting his attention to the standard canon of *Nashim* and *Nezikin*, the Rav would undertake *masekhtot* far outside the usual range of “*yeshivishe masekhtot*.” Thus, the Rav said *shiur* in the Yeshiva on *Eruvin*, *Succa* (from the beginning), *Sanhedrin*, *Nidda*, *Hilkhos Nidda*, *Halla*, on *Minhat Hinukh* (e.g. *Hilkhos Mila*, *Tefillin*, *Tsitsit*), *Masekhet Shabbat* (including the latter *perakim* involving *muktze*). During the summers, the Rav would hold *shiurim* for a *kollel* in Boston, during which he would learn yet other *masekhtot*, including *kodashim*.

Of course, the Rav also said *shiur* on such standard “*yeshivishe masekhtot*” as *Baba Kama*, *Baba Metsia*, *Baba Batra*, *Gittin*, *Kiddushin*, *Yevamot*, *Hullin* and *Yore De’a*. During *Elul*, his *shiurim* might focus on *sugyot* from *Rosh haShana* and *Yoma* (particularly focusing on *Avodat Yom haKippurim*). One *Elul* in Boston, the Rav even said *shiurim* on *Likutei Torah* of the *Ba’al haTanya*.

I have heard from Rav Ahron Soloveichik that Rav Chaim, *zt”l*, did not believe in a hard-and-fast separation between halakha and aggada. Certainly, the Rav well understood the unity of halakha and aggada in Jewish thought, and his approach to *derush* played heavily on their interrelationship. The Rav felt that aggada too needed the strong intellectual underpinning which could be provided only by a halakhic emphasis utilizing *Brisker* methodology.

The Rav’s *Yahrtzeit shiurim* were generally constructed upon a number of halakhic problems, which the Rav would attempt to resolve using a particular principle. After the resolution of the halakhic issues, the Rav would explore a topic in *aggadta* which was generally related to the halakhic discussion.

A similar pattern might apply at the Rav’s *teshuva derasha*, which the Rav gave publicly during the *asseret yemei teshuva*. The text to be examined would usually be a passage from *Rambam Hilkhos Teshuva*. In this *derasha*, which was an extremely moving experience for all participants, the unity of halakha and aggada was even more pronounced.

These public *shiurim* were masterpieces of structure, with all of the disparate problems and discussions coming together in an integrated whole. In most years, the topics dealt with relatively popular or accessible areas such as *tefilla*, *keriat haTorah* or *mo’ed*. On some occasions, the Rav’s *Yahrtzeit shiur* might address issues he had addressed in his weekly *shiur*. The *Yahrtzeit shiur* was more focused and organized, but by its very nature could not explore all the possibilities the Rav had raised in the weekly *shiur*.

As is obvious from the tremendous breadth displayed in *shiur*,

which literally touched upon “*gants Shas*,” the Rav had a remarkable *bekiut*, encyclopedic knowledge, which was dwarfed only by his *harifut*, his analytical acuity. The Rav’s *bekiut* was in some sense all the more remarkable because of the somewhat circumscribed focus of his primary attention. The Rav once told us that Rav Chaim’s definition of a *lamdan* was “one who knows *peshat* in every *Rashi*, *Tosefot*, *Rambam* and *Ra’avad* in *Shas*,” listing these *rishonim* because they are the ones who themselves wrote on *gants Shas*. With some hesitation, the Rav then added *Ramban* and *Rashba* to the list. With some additions (*Ba’al haMa’or*, *Maggid Mishne*, *Minkhat Hinukh*, and *Rebbi Akiva Eiger*), these constituted the main focus of the Rav’s attention during *shiur*. The Rav told us that Rav Chaim’s personal set of *sefarim* was quite limited, consisting of a *Shas*, a *Tur-Shulkhan Arukh*, and an extremely limited set of *aharonim*. In *Bi’ur haGra* on *Shulkhan Arukh*, the Vilna Gaon had refocused *pesak halakha* on *mekorot halakha*—on *Shas Bavli*, *Yerushalmi*, and *rishonim*, and on careful readings of text. The *Brisker derekh* incorporated a similar attention to *mekorot* in its reformulation of *lomdus*, to allow for a fresh examination of basic texts without preconceived notions.

With a sensitivity to the nuances inherent in the words of the *rishonim*, the Rav taught us to carefully analyze the various commentaries with regard to the conceptual differences between them. Although the Rav (and the *Brisker derekh* generally) was focused on his own redefined area of study, his *bekiut* reached out to classic halakhic problems and sources illustrative of a particularly *hakira* or supportive of a particular formulation. Whenever relevant, the Rav might well introduce an interpretation of the *Ketsot haHoshen* or *Netivot* on a certain issue. The Rav was more reluctant, however, to add newly discovered *rishonim* (such as *Meiri*) to the recognized canon, except when the *rishon* himself had been cited previously in sources such as *Shita Mekubbetset*.¹⁰ This reluctance sometimes proved a validation of the Rav’s *derekh*, when positions only hinted at in *Rashi*, *Tosefot* or *Rambam* were explicitly taken by *rishonim* which the Rav had never studied. Using his remarkable intuition, the Rav could discern the possible approaches of *rishonim* even when he had never studied them.

After a hiatus of a number of years away from the *shiur*, I returned briefly to once again sit in on the Rav. At that time, I recall being struck by the Rav’s demands for absolute precision of definition (which I could not possibly duplicate on my own) and his insistence on interpreting *rishonim* literally, even when common sense dictated that they could not possibly have meant what they seemed to be saying. In “mil-

hamta shel Torah,” there are times when prudent retreat (or even surrender) seems our only recourse. But the Rav could take difficult *shitot*, and by refusing to retreat or surrender, he would eventually triumph, with electrifying results.

One of the outstanding *talmidei hakhamim* at Yeshiva, Rav Nisson Alpert, would often discuss the Rav’s *biddushei Torah* with *talmidim* in the Rav’s *shiur*. He would point out that others before the Rav had offered similar *sevarot* or *peshatot*; he quoted a *yeshivishe* maxim—“Either it isn’t new, or it isn’t true!” While the Rav was a creative genius, it was true that if one searched thoroughly in *aharonim*, one could often find approaches similar to his. (Rav Hershel Schachter’s invaluable notes of the Rav’s *shiurim* often annotate just such sources.)

The Rav once related to us an anecdote concerning his grandfather’s reaction when he was told a “*shtikel Torah*” by other *talmidei hakhamim*. If he disagreed with the *peshat*, rather than enter into long discussions, Rav Chaim would politely say, “*Ikh hob okhet azoy gezogt, a bissele andersh*” (“I also said similarly, a bit differently.”). Of course, the “*bissele andersh*” of *Brisker Torah* can make all the difference in the world. Working within a highly structured discipline of strictly defined concepts, *Brisker Torah*, if it is to excel, depends on finely nuanced arguments and well-articulated distinctions. More importantly, *Brisker Torah* seeks to analyze the particular in terms of universally applicable principles. The Rav’s *biddushim* flowed naturally from this integrated view of Torah and were not designed to address merely the problem at hand. In this way, the Rav’s *biddushim*, even when they seemed similar to those of other *aharonim*, remained “*a bissele andersh*.”

Two anecdotes related to us by the Rav exemplify distinctions between himself and even other *Brisker lamdanim*. In trying to differentiate the *mesora* of the Brisker Rav from that of some other disciples of Rav Chaim, *zt”l*, the Rav quoted a family witticism, that if Rav Chaim had made the obscure statement, “A table is like a cow,” the Brisker Rav would have explained that the table is like a cow in that both have four legs. On the other hand, another disciple might very well have milked the table!

The Rav, of course, never “milked the table.” He highly esteemed the Brisker tradition, but recognized the need to properly interpret this tradition in the manner in which Rav Chaim, *zt”l*, intended. The Rav contributed through his great powers of *hasbara*—of exposition and explanation—to the preservation and explication of this tradition.

It was the Rav’s practice to actively solicit possible solutions from the *shiur*, and on a number of occasions, the *talmidim* were successful

in providing the *Brisker* formulation which he sought. On one occasion, perhaps to prevent hubris on our part, he turned to the *shiur* with the familiar metaphor of the monkeys in the British Museum, who, given enough time, would eventually type out the works of Shakespeare. "Yes," the Rav said, "if you throw around enough of the familiar terms—*heftsa, gavra* . . . you might very well occasionally come up with the proper formulation. The difference is that I understand it!"

The Rav wished to warn us of the potential to reduce Torah (and even *Brisker* Torah) to manipulation of words or phrases in a mechanical fashion, independent of a higher intelligence to harmonize the particular within the universal. The reduction of each case to individual *halakhot* carries with it the risk of an atomization of Torah to an incomprehensible collection of special situations. The Rav's special gift was creating "*lomdisher*" *hakirot* which not only were useful in resolving textual problems, but more importantly, were of *a priori* interest, independent of any given text, and in formulating solutions with an intuitive sensitivity regarding *kol haTorah kula*.

THE LEGEND AND THE LEGACY

The *Mishna* in *Sota* (Chapter 9, *Mishna* 15) relates, "When Rabbi Meir died, the era of *moshelei meshalot* (creators of parables) ended."¹¹ This seemingly trivial eulogy is a strange way to describe the greatness of Rabbi Meir, who was the primary, if anonymous, formulator of the *Mishna* itself ("*Stam Mishna Rabbi Meir*"). I would suggest that the *Mishna* relates not only to Rabbi Meir's practice of combining within his well-attended public *shiurim* halakha, *aggadita* and *meshallim* (parables), but also to Rabbi Meir himself, who through his greatness transformed himself into a mythic figure, into Rabbi Meir Ba'al haNes. In Rabbi Meir's relationship with *Aher*, in his survival in the *mayyim she-ein lahem sof*, in his wanderings to escape the Roman authorities, and of course in his heroic efforts to preserve *Torah she-Ba'al Pe*, Rabbi Meir captured the imagination of the Jewish people of his generation and all generations, despite the problems he encountered with others in authority.

In all of the retrospectives concerning the Rav, it is obvious that he too, has become a legend, a metaphor for the *talmid hakham* par excellence struggling with the modern age and triumphing. Many of those who have written about the Rav have written of the legend but not the man himself. There are, of course, variants or distortions of the legend devised by many who did not know the Rav, never had the privi-

lege of learning from him or his Torah, or those who sought to use the Rav to justify positions which he himself never espoused.

Those who learned from the Rav, those who came to love and venerate him, inevitably made him part of their lives and their souls. We must all be careful, however, not to recreate the Rav in our own image. The Rav was a *rosh yeshiva*, not merely a professor of Jewish Philosophy. He taught *Talmud Bavli* and *Shulkhan Arukh*, not some branch of Hebraic Literature; the Rav knew *gants Shas*, not Chekhov and Pushkin. The Rav sought not to embrace modernity, but rather to transcend it. The Rav fought valiantly against the secularization of Yeshiva. Let us fight just as valiantly against the secularization of the Rav himself.

Of course, part of the legend was the Rav's genius both in Torah and secular studies.¹² Certainly, the Rav was as rich and complex an individual as any *sugya* which he taught us. But the core of the Rav's existence remained his dedication to *limud Torah* and *yirat shamayim*. The ultimate lesson we must learn from the Rav is that this great genius devoted his outstanding intellectual energies so that Torah might be learned and preserved among us. The burden of his legacy to those who knew him best, those who learned his Torah, is to see to it that this Torah is preserved and learned by future generations and that we remain true to that which the Rav taught us throughout his life and through his life. Then we will have shared with others the privilege and glory of learning with the Rav.

NOTES

1. See the comments of Rambam, *Hilkhos Rotseah uShemirat haNefesh*, (VIII,1) in explaining the obligation of the master in following his *talmidim* into exile: "*ve-hayyei ba'alei hakhma u-me-vaksheha be-lo talmud ke-mita hashvin*"—"For the lives of the masters of wisdom and those who search after it are considered like death, without study."
2. I am told that the Rav's change of language came at the request of Rabbi Daniel Greer, who was a student at the time. Frankly, some of the students were under the impression that the language of instruction had been changed to Latin.
3. An emphasis on the analysis of *Rambam* in order to ascertain Rambam's understanding of the *sugya* being studied was a constant of the *shiur*. Based on *Rambam, Sefer haMitsvot, Mitsvat Asei 5*, the Rav saw *talmud Torah* and *tefilla* on a continuum of *avoda she-ba-lev*. Toward this end, the *lomdus* of *talmud Torah* (and *tefilla*) was especially significant for the Rav.
4. On one occasion, the *shiur* studied the *sugya* of *migu*, and the Rav grappled for a *hakira* with which to analyze the *shitot* of *Tosafot*. I tentatively offered the Rav the well-worn *yeshivishe hakira* as to whether *migu* was a

- "birur" or "ne'emanut." The Rav reacted as if he had never heard of such a *hakira*! I was not able to explicate it to his satisfaction, and the *shiur* moved on.
5. *Mishna Yoma* (7:1).
 6. See the *peshat* cited in the Rav's name at the conclusion of "*Reshimot Shiurim she-Ne'emru al yedei Maran haGaon Rabbeinu haRav Yosef Dov haLevi Soloveitchik Shelita al Masekhet Succa*," HaRav Tsvi Yosef Reichman (New York, 1989).
 7. The Rav related to us during the *shiurim* on *Yevamot* a story about Rav Chaim in which Rav Chaim was being evaluated as a potential *maggid shiur* at the beginning of his teaching career in Volozhin. Rav Chaim had been saying *shiur* on his *peshat* in *Rambam* concerning "*kol ha-ola le-yibburi ola la-halitsa*." Suddenly, Rav Chaim remembered the *Rambam* in *Hilkhos Melakhim* concerning the *sugya*, which contradicted what he had said. Rav Chaim then closed his *gemara*, explained he had been in error, and dismissed the class. "Needless to say," the Rav added, "Rav Chaim kept his position."
 8. See *Rambam, Hilkhos Shabbat*, (Chapter II, 3).
 9. This aspect of *mesora* is discussed by the Rav in "*Shiurim leZekher Aba Mari, Z"l*," vol. I. (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 220-238.
 10. See "The Role of Manuscripts in Halakhic Decision Making: Hazon Ish, His Precursors and Contemporaries," Moshe Bleich, *Tradition* 27:2 (1993), for a review of the position of *gedolim* with respect to newly discovered manuscripts.
 11. A similar *yeshivishe* maxim asserts (in Yiddish), "When you go on the highway, you meet people."
 12. The Rav was, of course, aware of his reputation for genius and made fun of it. Once, the Rav told us, he received a call from a desperate *ba'al ha-bayit* with a puzzling problem. Could the Rav help him find *Masekhet Makkot* within the *Shas* which was in his bookcase? He had already searched at the end of *Shavuot*, where it is often found, and had similarly eliminated inclusion within the volume of *Avoda Zara*. Reaching back to a *Shas* he had once seen years earlier, the Rav suggested he look after *Baba Batra*. The grateful *ba'al ha-bayit* checked and came back to the Rav with the familiar refrain, "Rabbi Soloveitchik, you really are a genius!"