

# A Tribute to My Close Friend

There is something extraordinary about close friendships formed during the youthful years. The bonds are so strong and so deep that they endure undiminished even when time and distance come between. Perhaps it is because those are the years when we mature, when our personalities and our attitudes take shape, when we become who we will be for the rest of our lives. The close friends with whom we share this journey become welded to our very essences, and therefore, even if the vicissitudes of life prevent us from spending as much time together as we would like, the bonds remain indestructible; even if we meet after long periods of separation, the flames of friendship are instantly rekindled.

A few weeks ago, I lost one of my closest friends with the passing of Rav Yaakov Busel *zatzal*, the illustrious *rosh yeshivah* of Edison, New Jersey. We met when we were teenagers in Brooklyn, we were together in Lakewood for many years, and we essentially parted ways forty years ago when he left to build his *yeshivah*. My purpose here is not to write about his role and accomplishments as *rosh yeshivah*. I had no firsthand knowledge of it, although his *talmidim* always spoke of him to me with great reverence and admiration. Rather, I want to write about our friendship that was as strong on the last day of his life as it was on the day he left Lakewood. I want to pay tribute to my beloved friend whose absence I find inconceivable.

When I was fourteen, I changed *yeshivos* and went to Chaim Berlin, where I had the incredible *zechus* of attending the *shiur* of Rav Yaakov Moshe Shurkin *zatzal* during the last year of his life. My good friend R' Yosef Eichenstein, with whom I'd grown up in Frankel's shul in Crown Heights, was in the *shiur* with me, as was R' Yitzchak Stareshesky, my

new friend.

Rav Shurkin's *shiur* was a revelation. He focused on the concepts of the Gemara, Rashi and Tosefos, and occasionally the Rambam. He mentioned other Rishonim only rarely and never mentioned Acharonim, although he blended their ideas into his *shiur*. He trained us to identify the underlying *lomdus* in every Gemara by always asking probing questions and challenging us to come up with our own *chakiros* and *svaros*. Every day was a thrilling adventure

During the year after Rav Shurkin's *petirah*, his son R' Michal organized and led a *chaburah* of four *bachurim*. Three of them, R' Yosef, R' Yitzchak and I, were from his father's *shiur*. The fourth *bachur* was R' Yankel Busel from Yeshivah of Eastern Parkway, a satellite *yeshivah* of Chaim Berlin that always learned the same *mesechte*. This was how I came to meet my dear and lifelong friend.

Our *chaburah* met in a *shtiebel* in East Flatbush every Friday and Shabbos for a total of six to eight hours. Although R' Michal was just a few years older, he was already an accomplished *lamdan*, and he had access to many *shiurim* from various sources. His *chaburos* resembled his father's *shiurim*, only they were more penetrating. We strained to bring our learning to an elite level, and we competed with each other to give the best answers to his questions. Sometimes, we arrived on our own to the answers R' Michal had prepared. Sometimes, we advanced new ideas. And sometimes, we just threw our hands up in frustration and waited for his solutions.

After Havdalah in his mother's house, R' Michal distributed papers and pens, and we reviewed everything we learned and took brief notes. During the rest of the week, we wrote in our notebooks all the *biurim* and *chiddushim* that emerged from our learning together.

Over time, the four of us became close friends. We learned together and shared our notes, and during *bein hazmanim*, we even went on some excursions together. The bonds of our friendship, forged by the common ambition to broaden our Torah knowledge and excel in our expertise, would

endure for the rest of our lives.

The following year, R' Yankel Busel went to Beis Midrash Govoha in Lakewood. In those days, the *yeshivah* had a summer program for *bachurim* from other *yeshivos* and *mesivtos*. R' Yankel had taken advantage of the program the previous summer, and now, he integrated smoothly into the *yeshivah*. Although we were no longer together on a weekly basis, we were still together during off Shabbosim and vacations.

Two years later, when I considered joining him in Lakewood, R' Yankel encouraged me to come and assured me that he would take care of everything. R' Yankel was a big *metzuyan*, and he had been accepted into the best *chaburah* in the *yeshivah*, which included R' Shmuel Miller, R' Yerucham Olshin, R' Chaim Ginsberg, R' Yisroel Newman, R' Nissan Goodman, R' Yehoshua Hirschberg, R' Yaakov Fensterheim, R' Heshy Basch and others.

True to his word, when I arrived in Lakewood, everything was prepared for me. He introduced me to the *chaburah* and arranged *chavrusos* for me. He reserved for me a seat near him in the dining room with other members of our *chaburah*. Best of all, we became roommates, and we learned as *chavrusos* for many *zmanim*. We usually took walks and did other things together. A young man recently told me that his father remembers us from our time together in the *yeshivah* as inseparable best friends.

Although he was only a year older than I was, I looked up to him and sought to follow his lead. I had kept comprehensive notes of R' Michal's *chaburos* before coming to Lakewood, but at eighteen years of age, I don't know if I would have been motivated to continue to keep a meticulous record of my own *chiddushim*. Indeed, I don't know if I would have been motivated to strive for a constant flow of *chiddushim*. But the example of R' Yankel, my *chavrusa* and roommate, was always before my eyes. He was constantly writing *chiddushim* in pocket-sized, six-hole, loose-leaf binders, and before long, I found myself doing the same.

R' Yankel's father, R' Yehoshua Abba, was a *talmid* of the Mir, who

traveled to Shanghai with the *yeshivah* and remained there for the duration of the Second World War. He married the daughter of a Russian family who had emigrated to the city of Harbin in northeastern China after the Russian Revolution of 1905 and moved to Shanghai during the war. R' Yankel was born in Shanghai at the end of the war. The Mirrer *talmidim*, especially after their shared wartime experiences, became more than a *yeshivah*, more even than a community. They became an extended family.

R' Yankel grew up in the warm bosom of this extended family, and in his mind, that was ideal of a *yeshivah*. That was the experience he sought for himself in Beth Medrash Govoha, and that was the environment he would someday create when he co-founded the Edison *yeshivah*. R' Yankel formed relationships with numerous other *talmidim*, almost all of them based on learning. He loved to spend Shabbos in the *yeshivah*, and he was very quick to return when he occasionally went home for Shabbos. Although singing was not among his greatest talents, the songs in the dining room and the *nusach* of the *tefilos* clearly struck deep chords in his soul, and he joined with a look of rapture on his face. The *yeshivah* experience in all its multitudinous facets was his life.

When R' Yankel became a *chassan* to Rassi Sorotzkin, the daughter of Rav Boruch Sorotzkin, I was one of his only two friends who flew to Cleveland for his *tena'im*. The other was R' Shlomo Cohen, his longtime friend and classmate, who returned from Eretz Yisrael and joined R' Michal's *chaburah* shortly after R' Yankel had left for Lakewood.

While I was still a *bachur*, I enjoyed many Shabbos *seudos* in the warmth of his home. When I got married, he made us a *sheva berachos*, and afterwards, we were often guests in their home. Our friendship never waned.

Forty years ago, he left Lakewood to establish and lead the Edison *yeshivah* together with R' Yosef Eichenstein, our close friend. At his *seudas preidah*, I spoke about the depth of my gratitude to him for everything he had done for me, but most of all, I was grateful for his friendship. It was an honor and a privilege. An indescribable gift.

R' Yankel's departure was bittersweet for me. I was happy and excited for the bright and eminently well-deserved future unfolding for him, but I was saddened that he would no longer be an integral part of my daily life. Over the years, we still maintained contact. We shared *simchos*, and we spoke from time to time. I often sought his advice about personal issues and showed him some of my writings for comments and criticism. His observations were always wise and astute. When his first wife passed away after a short illness, I tried to comfort him, and afterward, when he married Esther Cohen, a fine woman whom I had known for years, I offered him as much support and encouragement as I could.

A year ago, he was diagnosed with cancer, which came as an awful shock. I began to call him every week or every few days. I had also been widowed and remarried a few years ago, and I came to visit him with Zvia, my new wife, whom he welcomed warmly and graciously. He kept me informed of all the details of his medical progress, and I was relieved that the prognosis was encouraging.

When the corona epidemic struck, I was terrified. His medical situation, for all the hope the doctors harbored, made him particularly vulnerable to the virus. He assured me that he was fully aware of the risks and had gone into total isolation. I continued to call him regularly. A week before Rosh Hashanah, he informed that he had contracted the virus but that he was feeling reasonably well. Two days before Rosh Hashanah, he told me that his condition had deteriorated. He was worried that he might have to spend Rosh Hashanah in the hospital. Right after Rosh Hashanah, I called his stepdaughter, Mrs. Miriam Hirsch, who types my *kesavim*. She told me that he was in the hospital and that his condition was serious.

From that time on, I called Mrs. Hirsch practically every day for updates. Sometimes the news was not good. Sometimes it was hopeful. During the last week of his life, I didn't call her. I was too afraid of what I might hear. I knew only what everyone else knew from the public announcements.

When the final announcement came, although it was not unexpected, I was shocked and devastated. I felt a sharp and profound loss. I also felt a deep regret for not having made a greater effort to spend more time with my friend, for thinking that someday I would visit him more often, but sometimes someday doesn't come.

I have not written this article as a *hesped* for my cherished and beloved friend. My purpose was not to extol his greatness as a *gaon* and a human being. His outstanding children and grandchildren and his hundreds of *talmidim* bear eloquent testimony to his extraordinary stature. I wrote this because I know he would appreciate the personal sentiments expressed here.

I miss you, my friend.